

Trials of Faith

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SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; Rated M. 2 and a half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Finally a new chapter after 5 years - Chapter 11 is up!

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Homecoming

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Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 1: Homecoming

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** " / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , **(Author's interruptions)**

Warning: The story will start off focusing on the Rookie Nine characters first before Naruto will appear (probably from the 3 or so chapters onwards). However, it will slowly become more and more focussed on Naruto and what's happening to Ruri. Hope you all enjoy the first chapter of the last arc in the Faith Series. By the way, Sasuke will seem very OOC. This is deliberate so don't complain.

Chapter 1

Kotetsu yawned as he watched a flock of birds fly off into the distance and disappear past the giant walls of Konoha. Gazing at his watch once more, he was rather put off to find that only 5 minutes had passed since the last time he had checked his watch. This means that he still had 5 hours, 45 minutes and 7 seconds before the end of his shift. */ Man... I really hate guard duty. Nothing ever happens... What happened to the good ol' days when we get*

invaded, or went under siege and stuff? God! What I wouldn't give for a little excitement./

"Oi!" His partner nudged Kotetsu's ribs. "Looks like someone's coming this way." Izumo warned. In an instant, Kotetsu's eyes were zeroed in on the cloaked traveller walking their way.

Said traveller was wearing a long, thick, woollen cloak with a hood that covered off his entire face. His boots - which were the only items not hidden by the long brown cloak - were simple black Ninja sandals, indicating the owner's own Ninja background.

"Halt!" Kotetsu called even while he readied himself for any unexpected provocation from the stranger. Beside him, Izumo stepped forward in an inconspicuously relaxed manner.

"Please let us have a look at your identify card and travelling papers. What is your purpose for coming to Konoha Gakure no Sato?" Izumo asked in a diplomatic manner even while he held out his hands for the scroll the stranger had pulled out of his cloak.

"I'm returning home." A young, male voice spoke from within the hood.

Izumo raised an eyebrow in scepticism before unrolling the scroll and reading its contents. Immediately, his eyes widened in surprise before a small smile appeared on his face. "Well, I was wondering when you were gonna come back. Welcome home, boy." Rolling the scroll back up, Izumo returned it to the cloaked young man. "Better get going now. I know that the Hokage would want to see you asap, and lets not forget all your female fans waiting for your return."

The stranger shifted slightly in irritation at the last comment. "I was kinda hoping they would forget about me." He muttered under his breath.

Izumo barked a short laugh. "As if. It's good to see you home." The older man nodded before letting the younger man pass without

further trouble.

Once the stranger had walked pass the giant doors and into Konoha territory, Kotetsu quickly turned his attention back to his partner.

"Who the hell is that?"

Izumo gave Kotetsu a whimsical smile. "Remember those kids that went to the Kuunoki about 2 and a half years ago?"

"Yeah." Kotetsu shrugged. "A few of them stayed back while the rest returned. So what?"

"Well, he's one of the ones that have finally come home." Izumo answered.

And that's when Kotetsu finally realised the implication. "Which one?" The scarred man asked in excitement.

Izumo lifted an eyebrow and shrugged. "You'll just have to wait and find out."

"MEANIE..."

/ There's gotta be a better way to beat paperwork... / Tsunade thought to herself miserably. Eyebrow twitching at the mountains of paper staring her way, she threw her hands up in the air in exasperation. "Ah! Stuff it! There's got to be something more exciting than this happening today that needs my attention." With that said, she dragged out the Sandaime Hokage's old crystal ball and started scrying around the village, looking for something interesting to alleviate her boredom. It was here when she stumbled upon the entry of the cloaked stranger and how Izumo was referring to the young man after having read the scroll. It didn't take long for her to realise who exactly this stranger was. "So, he's come back." She mumbled beneath her breath.

"Tsunade-shisou! You need to sign off those documents by this afternoon because the auditors are coming to review the progress on some of these developments!" Sakura called out loudly from the newly opened door in order to catch her part time teacher's attention.

Giving the younger girl a cheeky smirk. "Say Sakura, why don't we go out for a walk, seems like one of your old team mates have finally come home."

"Eh? Who?" Sakura was immediately interested.

"This place hasn't changed all that much since the last time I was here. Strange how I didn't miss it so much until I've arrived back." The young man snorted to himself sardonically, before pulling his hood back down and revealing his face for the first time. Silky strands of long ebony hair framed the young man's face on both sides, while spiking behind his head, creating a strange bird's tail appearance from behind (1). His dark eyes gazed softly across the vision of the Hokage's monument, which now featured the face of Godaime Hokage upon it. His skin was still as pale as ever, no matter how much time he spends under the sun. And as compared to two and a half years ago, Uchiha Sasuke has certainly grown in height, broadness and stature, but also in presence.

"Yo. Welcome home, Sasuke." Kakashi's lazy voice called to the younger man on his right side, hands still holding onto the newest version of the Icha Icha paradise book.

Sasuke smirked at his ex-sensei, eyes slightly sad that it had taken so long for the two to reconcile. "Kakashi-sensei, what are you doing here?" His calm voice asked.

"To welcome you home, as you already heard." This time, was the Hokage's voice that called up to him from below the pole that he stood upon proudly. Beside the Hokage stood his ex-teammate Sakura; and behind them were the members of his existing team – Kurenai-sensei (although she seemed to have gained an awful lot of

weight it seemed), Kiba (sitting on top of a giant white dog that could only be Akamaru's grown up form), and Hinata (the ever shy girl stood straight and calm, regal in appearance). Surprisingly, Aburame Shino was also present, with an even longer jacket and hood covering more of his face and head (2).

Sasuke's smirk turned into a small smile, before jumping down onto the ground to join his friends and team-mates. Straightening up again, he gazed across all of them. "It's good to see you all again."

Smiles spread across every face, before Sakura's eyes dimmed slightly in remembrance. She gave a heavy sigh before slumping her shoulders, as if in defeat. "Now, all we need is to wait for Naruto to get back before the old team 7 is complete."

Sasuke's eyebrow raised in confusion. "Hasn't Naruto returned yet? I thought he was the first one to leave, even before the tournament started."

Sakura shrugged. "He did leave early, but he never came home. We found out afterwards that he left on a training journey alone, without any escort or even informing Tsunade Shisho. If it wasn't for the scroll that Kaga had me hand over to Tsunade Shisho, Naruto may well have been labelled a missing nin or missing in action and all that. But yeah, it's been two and a half years now, and he's still not back. No one knows anything about his whereabouts or what's happening to him. We've lost complete contact."

"Actually, we were hoping that you might have some news, considering you were the last one (next to Naruto of course) to have stayed away from Konoha." Kakashi snapped his book shut before stuffing it away. "But it looks like you're in the dark as well."

Sasuke shook his head, denying that he had any more information on the mysterious blond. "I wasn't suppose to stay as long as I did, but things came up in the last 6 months that forced me to stay behind." Sasuke's face tinged slightly with a pink hue, which

immediately brought the unwanted attentions of a Hyuuga, Inuzuka and Aburame.

"And what might those complications be, Uchiha Sasuke?" Shino calm voice asked. For those who knew the Aburame well, they could hear the curiosity in his voice, but most would not pick up on that at all. "If I remember correctly, most of the participants of the Hidden Air Chuunin exam – namely those without apprenticeships, left the Kuunoki straight after the tournament. Those that had been invited for apprenticeships stayed with their masters to learn more, at least for a while longer. I, myself, stayed for a mere 5 months before returning to Konoha. I know that a few of the other apprentices had left even before me, but a few stayed behind, yourself and Temari-san included."

"Temari left to return to Suna about a year ago." Kiba spoke up this time. "Supposedly, other than yourself, she was the last one to leave and go home." Here he smirked. "Imagine her surprise when she finally got home and found out her younger brother had become Kazekage. Haha! Shikamaru was there and even he cracked up laughing at her open jawed expression."

Both Sasuke's eyebrows rosed to his hairline in surprise. "Gaara is Kazekage?"

"That's right! You wouldn't know, would you?! Oh God! Ha hahaha ha ha." Kiba started cracking up for no reason.

Sasuke frowned again, not at all happy at being laughed at. "What's so funny now, dog breath!?"

Kiba wiped a non-existent tear from his eyes. "How does it feel to be the only genin out of the Rookie-nine, Mister Rookie of the year (3)? Ahahahahahahaha"

Sasuke's eyes widened at the implication. He swiftly turned his attention to Hinata. "Is that true?" He whispered in a soft voice full of dread.

Hinata shyly nodded. "Everyone (as in everyone who participated in the Kuunoki exams) either reached Chuunin then or became a Chuunin within the next exam. Neji-niisan, Shino, Shikamaru and Kankuro of the Sand have all reached Jounin status. The rest of us are just taking some time to gain some more experience before we take the Jounin exams later on in the year. Only yourself is still registered as a genin."

"I can't believe..." Sasuke almost stuttered in disbelief. "But... I... I'm more... God damn it, I'm stronger than you all put together! Why the hell am I still a genin?!"

"Hey! Who're you calling weak, GENIN! I could take you!" Kiba taunted from atop Akamaru's shoulders. The giant dog barked in seeming agreement.

"Hm... That's one of the things we will have to do later on in the day – testing Sasuke and identifying his level of strength." Tsunade suddenly spoke up, interrupting what would have evolved into an unmitigated argument. "But before that, we have a few other things to discuss. Let's go to my office first. Having a serious discussion out on the open road is not something I'm fond of doing." The Hokage then turned sharply away from the group and started walking towards the Hokage tower. With no further words among them, the rest of the Chuunins and Jounins (and one Genin) joined in behind their leader.

It didn't take them long to reach Tsunade's office. Once there, everyone pretty much settled down, sitting on chairs, leaning against walls, doors or tables. Tsunade then opened the discussion for more serious matters.

"First thing you should know Sasuke, is that the original teams 7, 8 and 10 have been reformed during your time away from Konoha. For me, it just seemed easier that way, since Naruto isn't back yet, and having Sakura study under me full time, the other members of the Rookie nine needed to be reformed into their original teams so that

they can be useful. This is why you won't be joining back up with Kurenai, Kiba and Hinata; instead, you will regroup with Sakura and Kakashi to form team Kakashi. When Naruto comes back, he too will be placed in this specialty combat team." Tsunade paused slightly to study Sasuke's expression. The boy seemed a little disappointed but at the same time he also looked relieved. Shrugging the tension away, she continued on with the rest of her explanation.

"Now, I want a full recount of events regarding why you were so late in your return. Not only that, but I also want a report on your current level of skills and what you've learnt so far." The Hokage demanded in a commanding voice.

Standing tall and saluting his commander in chief, Sasuke started a detailed summary of his time at the Kuunoki. "During the first year of my stay at the Kuunoki village, Katono-sama had me learn the basic art of fire bending, as well as the use of the Dual Dao-sword (4)." The Uchiha heir paused in explanation as he pulled out his scabbard from beneath the cloak. There was only one scabbard, but in it there were 2 swords. One was the mirror image of the other and the two fit together perfectly to form one sword.

"After I've mastered the sword technique, it took me another year to perfect much of my fire bending moves. Fire Bending is an art that will take years, maybe even a life time, to perfect. I'm still only an intermediate 'bender' on the scale of things, not yet a master. But I am getting better. After two years of training, Katono-sama fell ill with old age. 6 months ago, he finally passed away peacefully in his sleep. That's what I meant when I said before that I was supposed to return 6 months ago." Sasuke paused for a moment, his eyes glazed in remembrance at having lost his master for the last 2 years. But unlike the Uchiha massacre, he was prepared emotionally for Katono's passing. His master was not murdered but instead passed away during the night in a peaceful sleep. It made a world of difference to Sasuke, and also helped him slightly in mourning for his past relatives as well. He finally understood that everyone dies, how they die may or may not be in their control, but they all share one

destiny – death. As such, he realised that he could mourn, but should not dwell too long on other's deaths. For as long as he himself was alive, he should live in place of those that had passed away.

Clearing his throat and refocusing his thoughts, Sasuke continued with the rest of his explanation. "After Katono-sama's passing, I was stuck halfway through my training and had to come up with ways to improve myself. Kaga-san supplied me some of the ancient scrolls on the bending arts and I learnt from them. Lady Ruri also released me from the 2-star seals, hence why both my Sharingan eyes as well as the curse seal can be activated now."

After the last sentence, a few gasps of surprise were heard from behind Sasuke; even the Hokage narrowed her eyes in slight anger. "I can understand why she released Naruto's seal on the Sharingan. But why the hell did she release the Curse Seal as well?" Having heard of what had happened to the Uchiha from Sakura after she had returned from her training in the Kuunoki, Tsunade was very surprised that Ruri would willingly dissolve a seal that Naruto had placed on the last Uchiha himself.

Surprisingly, Sasuke squirmed a little on his feet under the scrutiny of everyone in the room. "She said that since it was my actions that resulted in my having the curse seal, I will eventually have to deal with the fall out of that. I did the deed, now I need to face the punishment. Part of the last 6 months of my stay in the Kuunoki was spent in training myself on how to use and control the curse seal. Luckily, the Lady Oracle isn't as cruel as to let me train with the curse seal on my own. She or sometimes Kaga-san would supervise me when I'm in either the curse seal stage 1 or stage 2 forms. I'm not completely able to control myself, but at the very least, I've come to a point where I can manage to keep my head pretty well. I will always be far more aggressive in either forms, but I won't go off on a killing spree or let Orochimaru manipulate my mind anymore. The last I heard from Ruri-sama, is that I'm pretty much on the same level of sanity (or insanity as the case may be) as Mitarashi Anko.

That's pretty much it." The last Uchiha shrugged in a non-threatening way, trying to ease the tension in the air.

Unfortunately, Tsunade's eyes were still narrowed in suspicion. "I'll let it go, Uchiha. But if you take any untoward action against any one in this village, and I do include the most minute of actions against any Konoha civilian or citizen, then you will face MY wrath, understood?"

It didn't take an idiot to figure out she was referring to Sasuke's original defection from the Leaf village to the Sound village, and Sasuke himself knew well how lightly he had gotten off regarding his act of treason. He wasn't about to make such a monumental mistake again. "I understand, Hokage-sama." He bowed in acknowledgment.

"Good, continue with your story. What else has happened to hamper your return?" Tsunade switched the conversation topic neatly away from Sasuke's curse seal matter.

"Um... well." For the first time in... ever, Sasuke seemed to be showing a bit of nervousness and shyness. "I kinda... um... that is."

"Spit it out, UCHIHA." Tsunade simply did not have the patience or was she in the mood to deal with a temperamental Uchiha.

"I kinda got engaged." Sasuke finally answered.

There was a long pause of silence.

"You WHAT!!!" Suffice to say, that was the thought of everyone's mind at the moment.

Giving an uncharacteristic sigh of defeat, Sasuke bowed his head slightly to hide his blushing face. "It was after a long day of training and I was exhausted. I didn't have the energy to walk all the way back to Katono-sama's home for a well deserved bath, so instead, I just went to one of pristine lakes near the Oniyoubu forest, as that's where I've been spending my time training. I wasn't really paying

much attention when I stumbled into the clearing. Hell, I didn't even realise I wasn't alone until a squeak of surprise was sounded off right at my face."

"wait. Wait. WAIT!" Tsunade interrupted, her face flushed with sudden understanding. "Did you just say Oniyoubu forest?"

Sasuke could only nod and kept silent.

It took a little bit of time before the others finally caught on to the hidden meaning. "Oniyoubu forest? As in the Oniyoubu clan forest?" Hinata, being best friends with a member of the Oniyoubu clan was the first to pick up the clue.

"You mean those guys with their face always wrapped in bandages. And whoever sees their face first gotta marry them?" Of course Kiba would be the one to remember the obscure things about a clan's traditions.

"And you just stumbled into a clearing often used as an outside bath for members of the Oniyoubu clan, didn't you?" Sakura didn't know whether she should laugh at her ex-now-current team mate's predicament, or whether she should throttle him in not noticing he had walked into someone's bathing time.

"Hmm... are you marrying a male or a female?" Shino couldn't help but add in curiously, which immediately set off Kiba's funny bone, resulting in the dog boy howling with laughter.

Glaring at the red faced Inuzuka with all his worth, Sasuke growled out the last of his explanations. "It was a girl! And not just any girl! I stumbled into the path of a half naked Oniyoubu Maya – one of the Proctors for the Kuunoki Chuunin exam. (5)"

Again, a long silence ensued after Sasuke's abrupt declaration.

"You were spying on MY BEST FRIEND/A MEMBER OF THE GATE GUARDIANS?!" Both Hinata and Sakura spoke up in unison. Both

sported looks of wanting to bash the Uchiha's head in.

Sitting before all the drama, Tsunade could only shake her head in exasperation. "ENOUGH!" Silence followed her order. "Let's get back to the discussion at hand. Sasuke, you said you got engaged, which is why your return was delayed, is that correct?"

"Hai, Hokage-sama. I had to prove my worth in the eyes of the Oniyoubu clan leaders, which just so happen to be Maya-san's father. After that, I had to prove to them that I won't run away from my responsibilities, or else they refuse to let me leave. That's why it took so long for me to finally get home." Sasuke finished his story.

Tsunade nodded in understanding. She had heard wild stories about how the Oniyoubu clan would literary keep captive their chosen mates because they were afraid that their mates would somehow escape and runaway from their responsibilities to the clan, not honouring the contract. It wasn't unusual and she wasn't that surprised that it took the Uchiha such a long time to prove that he wouldn't back out of the contract. In fact, having heard his story, she was surprised that they would let him leave in the first place, considering his history of abandoning villages and such, but that was a completely different context.

"I see." The fifth Hokage nodded to herself. "Well then, let's update you on the happenings around Konoha while you were gone then. You want to start, Sakura?" Turning her attentions back to mulling over what the Uchiha had said, Tsunade indicated that Sakura and the rest would fill the Uchiha in all the going-ons in the village instead of having her ramble on.

Immediately switching to gossip mode, Sakura turned to face Sasuke directly, clearing her throat in an attempt to sound official. "Well, as Kiba has already told you, all of the Rookie nine members that took part in the Konoha Chuunin exams 3 years ago have reached Chuunin or Jounin status, other than yourself. Hinata has also mentioned that Neji, Shino and Shikamaru are all Jounins already. In fact, talking about Shikamaru, he's proctoring the Chuunin

Exams that's gonna be held in the Leaf village a few months from now, I wonder if you would be able to enter? But you'll need to go in a team of 3 though..." Sakura trailed off as her mind drifted.

Kiba took up the reins of explanation from that point on. "We've pretty much reformed back to the old teams 8 and 10. Me, Shino, Hinata and Kurenai are a team; although, due to Kurenai-sensei's condition, most of the C or B-ranked missions are just done by us three."

"Condition?" Sasuke turned to his ex-sensei, looking confused. "What condition, Kurenai-sensei? Are you sick?"

Flushing slightly at the Uchiha's attention and sending a slight glare at Kiba, Kurenai explained in a calm but rather uncomfortable tone of voice. "No, I'm not sick or anything. There's nothing physically wrong with me. I'm just... well... pregnant... would be the term." She finally admitted.

Sasuke's eyebrows rose into his hairline. "Really?" He stated in a stunned voice. "Wow... Ah... Um... congratulations!" Forcing himself to refocus his thoughts, Sasuke was able to finally blurt out his congratulations, even though he was still shocked and confused. "Um... could I please ask, whose the father?"

"That would be Asuma-sensei. Kurenai sensei and Asuma sensei plan on having a wedding a few months from now, after the Chuunin exams that is." The ever gentle Hinata explained, seeing as Kurenai was once again a little too embarrassed to answer.

"Wow, looks like a lot of things have changed." Pausing in his speech, Sasuke's eyes dulled slightly in understanding that he had lost a lot of time with his friends. They had all moved on while he had pretty much stayed the same. Well, that wasn't exactly true. He did somehow managed to get himself engaged to an incredibly powerful Shinobi of the Air, but still, compared to some of his other comrades; it sometimes feels as if he hasn't grown a lot.

"Anyway, Team 10 is currently a little split up at the moment. You'd be happy to hear that Ino is now semi-permanently stationed at Suna, working directly under the Kazekage as a representative of Konoha as well as one of his close advisors. How that blonde bombshell managed to talk or manipulate her way into the top seat, I have no idea, but she did. So yeah, you won't see much of her at all." Kiba jumped back into the rhythm of things by continuing his description as to what's happened to Sasuke's close relations in the past 2 and a half years.

"Kiba-kun. That's mean." Hinata interrupted Kiba's enthusiastic descriptions. "You know as well as anyone else that Ino-san has worked incredibly hard these last 2 and half years. She would have been able to ace the Jounin exams had she wished to take it. Her medical skills are on par with Shizune-sans, and swordsmanship is now being compared to those of the legendary 7 swordsman of the Mist. Let's not mention all those new techniques that she developed for herself that are completely unique, and plus she's mastered all her family techniques. Ino-san is truly a warrior to be feared and respected (6)."

"Yeah. Yeah! But you and I both know that she jumped at the chance to live in Suna, just so she can stay close to Gaara (7). That girl is obsessed with supporting that weird dude. I have no idea what she saw in him. Hell, her obsession with Sasuke during her younger years pale in comparison to her dedication to the Kazekage. If Konoha and Suna weren't allies, I sometime think she might switch sides you know..." Kiba grumbled as he remembered Ino's excitable departure from Konoha to Suna. The blonde girl had become truly dedicated to the lifestyle of Shinobi. No longer the atypical blonde stereotype; Ino had become serious regarding her Shinobi duties, but more than that, she had matured to become an incredible diplomat and manipulator of politics. Sometimes, Ino reminded Kiba a little too much of the Lady Oracle.

"So yeah. With Ino now semi-permanently stationed in Suna. Suna sent their own representative to stay semi-permanently in Konoha in

the last year, and this person turned out to be Temari-san. As such, the new team 10 consist of Temari, Shikamaru and Chouji. As you've just heard, Shika's working on the Chuunin exams, Temari is helping him; leaving Chouji and Asuma-sensei to take on missions assigned to their teams." Having refocussed herself now, Sakura jumped back into the conversation.

"In regard to Team Gai, their team didn't change much at all. They're still the best combat specialist team of Konoha. And although Neji is a Jounin, he opted to stay in his original team, instead of working alone. Of course, considering he's dating Tenten-chan and wanting to keep her safe might be a factor. And or he just didn't want to leave her alone with Gai and Lee." Kiba grinned sardonically as he imagined what Neji's reaction would be if he ever saw Tenten in one of those green spandex suits Gai and Lee always wore. God, what he wouldn't give to have a camera that could capture his imagined thoughts and print them out so he could use it as blackmail material, irregardless of the fact that they were imagined in the first place.

"Anyway, with the rest of the teams formed and stable, yourself and Naruto having not yet returned to Konoha, Sakura opted to work permanently as Tsunade-sama's assistant until a team vacancy was available for her. Now that you're back, you and Sakura will be working with me to form team Kakashi." For the first time, Kakashi actually put his infamous book away and looked directly at Sasuke and Sakura.

"Talking about reforming team Kakashi, I will need to evaluate your skills with my own eyes, Uchiha. It's all good and well to describe what you can do, but until I've seen it with my own eyes, I can't give an accurate judgement as to what kind of missions you should be given. As such, Kakashi will be giving both you and Sakura an exam of sort late this afternoon. Meet him at Training area 7 at 4 pm sharp. Until then, go and resettle yourself." Tsunade concluded the discussions before she shoed everyone out of her office.

Once out the door, Kakashi pretty much disappeared with a wave of his hand, head stuck back into his book. This left the rest of Team

Kurenai, Sakura and Sasuke standing around. The group spent the rest of the afternoon reacquainting Sasuke to some of the changes that had occurred in Konoha in the last few years – one of which being the Godaime's face becoming an addition to the Hokage monuments.

Time passed quickly and before long, both Sasuke and Sasuke were standing in training area 7, waiting for their tardy sensei's appearance just like old times.

"Heh. I never thought I'd visit this place again." Sasuke added quietly, his gaze soft upon seeing the memorial stone.

"Yeah, this place certainly brings back memories, or should I say nostalgia." Sakura agreed.

"Ah. Hard to believe it was 3 years ago, that you, me and Naruto became Genins here. Thinking back, we were such brats back then." Sasuke couldn't help but laugh. Now that he had matured and released much of the anger, hatred and darkness which plagued his soul for so many years, he could almost see the humour of his past.

Half an hour of lounging around doing nothing but waiting and reminiscing, Kakashi finally turned up. "Yo!"

"You're LATE! Sensei!" Sakura couldn't help but snap. His tardiness was still irritating her, no matter how long it has been since the last time she had been his subordinate.

"Ma! Ma! No need to be so hasty." Placing his precious book away in his ninja pouch, Kakashi then turned his gaze upon his students/subordinates. "Well, let's get down to business huh?" Pulling out two very familiar bells and tying them to his waist, Kakashi grinned behind his mask. "I'm sure you remember these. The rules are the same as before. Do everything in your power to try to get these bells from me. You have until sunrise tomorrow."

"You start NOW." Kakashi's commanding voice even as he pulled up his hitaite and showed off his single Sharingan eye in preparation. In response to his command, Sakura quickly pulled on firm, black gloves onto both her hands, while Sasuke pulled out his dual Dao Swords and took a swordsman's stance in preparation.

Impatient to start, Sasuke suddenly rushed towards Kakashi while taking the moment to activate his newly learnt fire bending skills. The flames flicked into life near Sasuke's wrists and quickly engulfed the whole of his twin Dao Swords. Swinging both swords in a graceful arc, Sasuke released twin half-moon shaped fire blades flying directly towards Kakashi, ready to slice the man's body in half.

Kakashi's eyes widened at the surprise onslaught, but being the veteran that he was, he avoided the deadly flames by simply ducking beneath the attacks. Pulling out several shuriken, the Jounin flicked his wrist and threw them towards Sasuke.

With his Sharingan eyes activated, Sasuke easily manoeuvred his burning swords to block and deflect all of Kakashi's shuriken. With the flying projectiles dealt with, Sasuke concentrated once more on his fire bending and Dao blades. Crossing the two swords together to form an 'X', Sasuke took a deep breath before blowing out a large fire ball that simply sat seemingly comfortably in between the crossed blades. Ready to release his attack, Sasuke shouted as he uncrossed the blades, and released the giant fire ball towards Kakashi. This attack was very dissimilar to the Gokakyu no jutsu, the only difference being the fire ball continued to get larger and larger as it flew across the air, seeming absorbing more and more oxygen fuelling itself as it progressed.

Knowing instinctively that ducking won't help in this situation, Kakashi quickly performed some lightning fast hand seals. "Doton! Gaeshi" (Earth Element, Mud Shield). Slamming his hands onto the ground, a large but flat piece of square land suddenly flipped vertically up, protecting Kakashi from the incoming fire ball.

Fire and earth smashed together in an explosion of ash and burnt soil, but keeping Kakashi unharmed for the most part. However, Kakashi knew that that wasn't all his ex-student's had up their sleeve, and he quickly jumped backwards just in time to avoid Sakura smashing her way through his signed by still standing earthen wall. Sakura's glove covered fist was blazing with blue chakra, and Kakashi knew that one hit from those dangerous fists and it would be all over.

Needing to create some distance, Kakashi flipped, jumped and spun backwards until he landed safely on a pool of water created by the river that passed through the training area 7. Rapidly performing a long set of hand seals in only a few seconds, Kakashi performed his second jutsu for the day. "Suiton! Suiryuu dan no jutsu! (Water Element: Water Dragon Blast)" A large water dragon head emerged from the once calm river. Roaring its intent, it flew towards the two teens without mercy, leaving the two young Shinobis with no time to prepare. Sasuke at least was able to avoid most of the impact by jumping away onto a branch of a near by tree when the water dragon smashed its way onto the ground they once stood on. But poor Sakura was not that lucky as she was caught by the full scale impact of the collision between water and earth, resulting in her being swept away by the power of the waves and slamming roughly against a tree trunk.

Angry that he hadn't been able to land a hit yet, Sasuke jumped off the safety of his branch, landing lightly on his feet before running across the still rushing water towards Kakashi, the young teen gave a feral yell as he attacked with all his skill. His dual swords danced in the air both elegantly and dangerously. Had Kakashi not been an experienced Jounin with decades under his belt, he would have surely suffered some major damage on his body. Unfortunately for Sasuke, Kakashi was as powerful as the legend states, and hence easily outmanoeuvred Sasuke's strikes at every point.

Having somewhat recovered from being swept away by the torrents of water just moments ago, Sakura ran towards her teammate with a

high pitched battle cry. She jumped just metres away from Sasuke and Kakashi's battle before landing with a mighty high kick worthy of Tsunade's legendary power. Suffice to say, the entire training ground within a 10 metre radius of ground zero (Sakura's foot in the literal sense) was fractured and crumbled into hundreds of chunks of earth and stone. Kakashi, being the smart man he was, managed to escape Sakura's legendary power by jumping away in the nick of time. Sasuke, having never seen either Sakura or Tsunade pull such a stunt before, was unaccustomed to the power the technique unleashed, and hence was completely unprepared, resulting in him tripping over his own feet, landing rather comically upon his butt.

Eyes terribly wide and focussed on Sakura's furious face, Sasuke made a mental note never to tempt Sakura's wrath ever again. With his attention focussed on his female teammate, Sasuke was rather put off when Sakura seemingly abandoned him in pursuit of their ex-sensei, whom had literally ran off into the distance.

Shaking his head clumsily and clearing his mind, Sasuke to himself, wondering why they were having such a hard time dealing with Kakashi. */ Think, Uchiha THINK! Kakashi's always sprouting about look underneath the underneath. What the hell is underneath this test then? He said he wanted to test our skills at the beginning. Well, we're both a hell of a lot more powerful than we use to be, so why the hell are we having so much trouble dealing with one opponent. Sure, he's a jounin and all, but with our skills, we should be able to beat him... if only we could... OF COURSE! I am SUCH AN IDIOT! Teamwork! Me and Sakura hasn't exactly been working together since the beginning of the Kuunoki exams. Sure, we've went at Kakashi one after another, but neither of us actively helped the other achieve something, it was more like avoiding each other's hits. Well, if we have to work together in order to take Kakashi down, then I'm all for it. /*

Having reached this revelation, Sasuke was finally focussed on completing the true test regarding this little conflict. */ Now, to find Sakura. Where the hell could they have gotten to? /* Deep inside

Sasuke's psyche, he couldn't believe that this time, it was he who is following Sakura, instead of the other way around. / *It feels so weird stalking my former-fan-girl in such a situation.* / Sasuke silently laughed to himself. / *But then again, Sakura had stopped being a fangirl of mine for a damn long time. I think... since the Wave country incident. She slowly but surely grew up, and now, she's a damn powerful and scary Kunoichi to boot. Damn, how time changes everyone...* / Sasuke's mind continued to wonder even while the rest of him automatically tracked Sakura and Kakashi's trail by following the line of destroyed trees and crumbled ground as evidence of their passing.

It didn't take him long to finally track Sakura down as she had finally lost Kakashi somewhere between the tress. Having calmed the rather frustrated girl down a bit, both Sasuke and Sakura finally put their brains together in order to devise a plan to catch Kakashi unaware. It was their only hope; that by working together, they can finally achieve something they had never been able to achieve before – beat Kakashi-sensei.

Time passed, and when Kakashi looked upon the darkening sky, he estimated that close to two hours had passed since he last saw Sakura. / *I wonder what they're up to at the moment.* /

With nothing else to do, Kakashi bunkered down beneath a fallen tree, sighing a little tiredly. / *It's starting to get dark. And unless I want to start a fire and give myself away, I won't be able to read my precious Icha Icha Paradise.* / He thought mournfully. Some things just doesn't change.

Several hours passed in tensed silence. Kakashi knew he was the hunted in this game of predator and prey. He didn't have the luxury of sleep or relaxation. He knew the minute he let his guard down would be his downfall. And although hours had passed in relative peace, this was only the calm before the storm.

And just as Kakashi had predicted, not two minutes later, the attacks began once more.

From behind several trees, a multitude of Sakura and Sasuke clones rushed out to meet Kakashi. However, with a kunai in each hand and his single Sharingan eyes blazing, it was child's play for Kakashi to cut down all the Bunshins in seconds. Eyes narrowed at the amount of smoke caused by the Bunshin's dispersing, it was instinct that led Kakashi to sense the presence of the real Sakura bearing down on him from above. Jumping off the ground and twisting around, Kakashi witnessed the fact that he barely got out of harms way when Sakura's chakra enhanced heel smashed into the ground he had been standing on, crushing the earth into a giant crater of stone and rubble.

Not out of danger yet, Kakashi's eyes widened as a strange flaming whip like appendage (8) suddenly swung towards him while he was trapped mid air. Thinking quickly, Kakashi created a shadow clone floating right beside him, and had the clone grab onto his arm's sleeve and pulled him out of the way of the fire whip just in the nick of time to avoid being burnt.

Landing on his feet, Kakashi immediately had to duck and swerve in order to dodge several smaller fire balls that were released by Sasuke's fists in a series of punch like motions. Unfortunately for Kakashi, Sasuke's fire bending required far less Chakra to perform compared to most of his high end Katon jutsus, as such, Sasuke could very well spend the entire day punching out fire balls at Kakashi without ever feeling any real tiredness.

Punch after punch after kick after punch, Sasuke kept the barrage of fire balls going, leaving Kakashi no room but to jump, duck, summersault and doge in order to stay alive. During a short half second intermission, Kakashi somehow managed to throw several shurikens into Sasuke's direction. Sasuke ducked beneath the flying projectiles and did two consecutive low sweeps with his legs, releasing two walls of fire crossing the ground towards Kakashi.

Seeing the incoming flames travelling towards him, Kakashi quickly performed a set of seals in response. "Suiton! Suijin Heki! (Water Element: Water Barrier!)" A wall of water condensed from the moisture of the air around him and from underground before erupting into a circular wall of water protecting Kakashi from the flames.

Above Kakashi, Sakura smashed her way through the water barrier with a chakra shield of her own, completely taking Kakashi by surprise. With no where to run or dodge due to the wall of water surrounding him still, Kakashi had no choice but to put both his arms up in a shield, hoping that he could grab onto Sakura's fist and twist it away before being hit by Sakura's imminent punches.

So distracted was Kakashi with Sakura, he did not realise that the second the water barrier dispersed, a kunai shot forth towards him, cleanly slicing through the strings that held the bells to his waist. The bells effectively dropped onto the ground unnoticed by Kakashi.

Having her fist blocked and grabbed by Kakashi's arms, Sakura twisted in mid air creating a half summersault, forcing Kakashi to release her arms lest he wish to dislocate her. Sakura managed to still cause damage though as she slammed her heel into the earth, causing an intense earthquake and rupturing the ground into a crater of rumble. Jumping away as fast as possible, Kakashi only had enough time to blink when he watched Sasuke rush headlong into the spot where he had been located just a second before. Sasuke performed a short cartwheel across the rumble of rock and sand, gripping something off the ground before it fell into one of the cracks and stood back up away with both his Sharingan eyes ablaze and an arrogant smirk on his face.

Noticing his teacher's curious expression, Sasuke opened his hand to reveal two small bells. "Looks like we won, Kakashi-sensei." He noted confidently, while Sakura grinned from beside him giving Kakashi a 'V' for Victory.

Kakashi only blinked, checked his waist once more to make sure that the bells really were gone, before giving both his ex-students a

sheepish expression. "Well, I guess you did."

After a short awkward pause, Kakashi coughed and recomposed himself. Looking up at the full moon that glowed brightly in the dark sky, Kakashi gave both Sasuke and Sakura a smile behind his mask. "Well, looks like you got it done on time. Good work. You can all go home and relax now, but remember to be up bright and early tomorrow morning. I'll meet you at the old bridge where the old team 7 usually meets up, at around 7 am and then we'll go to the Hokage's tower together. As of now, I need to go and report back to Hokage-sama. Ja ne!" With that said, Kakashi shunshin-ed away, leaving his two befuddled students behind to make their way home.

In a dark cave somewhere in the distance, 9 shadowy figures emerged from the darkness.

"So. Is it time for us to move yet? Hmm..." One of the dark figures asked from his perch hanging upside down from one of the stalagmites.

"Ah. It is time. We should start gathering the Jinchuriki and Bijuus. You all know which ones have been assigned to you already, so get to it. I wish to have the first of the bijous sealed within the next week." Another figure, obviously the leader spoke in a calm but commanding voice.

"What of the Kyuubi Jinchuriki? What do we do about him?" A third member piped up, this one had red eyes glowing brightly in the dim room – red Sharingan eyes.

"We leave the Kyuubi Jinchuriki to last. If we are unable to capture him, I have another option up my sleeve." The leader answered and the discussions were over. Each of the shadowy figures disappeared from sight, each already on their way pursuing their various targets.

Even farther away from the main land, standing on a small fishing boat rocking with each rise and fall of the raging sea, a white clad figure gazed upon the dark clouds covering the once deep blue sky. "And so it has begun; the trials of faith." Sweeping some of his long blond hair away from his brilliant sky-blue eyes, the young man whom spotted three whisker-like scars upon each cheeks of his face, gave a determined look towards the dark clouds. "Bring it on. I'm ready now!"

Chapter one end

(1) Hehehe... How many of you thought it was Naruto coming back alone. Nope, in this story, it starts off with Sasuke and Naruto will appear from the next few chapters onwards.

(2) Other than Sasuke, I've left most of the characters' clothes as they are in the Cannon series. Although I may change my mind at any time! After all, people don't wear the same clothes everyday.

(3) Ah, I like taunting Sasuke. It's fun.

(4) Say thanks to Quathis (A reviewer of mine). He/She gave me the idea to incorporate more of Avatar the Air Bender stuff here by giving Sasuke the skills in using Dual Dao swords, just like Zuko and the Blue Spirit. You can see a picture of this on my website (although the image itself is from Avatar)

(5) Sorry to any SasukeXSakura or SasukeXwhoever fans. I'm making this story a SasukeXOC, this is NOT NEGOTIABLE. But don't worry, it won't be very deep nor will it happen very soon. Sasuke and Maya have barely been on talking terms and even though they're engaged, it'll still take a while for romance to bloom or what have you. Not only that, I've said it before: I'm not very good at romance. I may even decide to finish the story before the romance even starts.

(6) Just like I've made Sakura stronger and more dedicated through out my story. I've done the same to Ino as well.

(7) Here are the first hints of the pairings that are in this story:

SasukeXOC (Maya)

InoXGaara

TemariXShikamaru

TentenXNeji

And yes, NarutoXHinata is still on the horizon

Once again, don't expect miracles. I'm mostly hinting

(8) This is the fire whip thing that Zuko used in his fight against Katara in the final episodes of Avatar the Last Airbender – Earth series.

Yay! I've finished the first chapter of ToF. Tell me what you think, please submit a review.

The Fate of Jinchuriki I

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 2: The Fate of Jinchuriki I

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** ", / *Thoughts* , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: Hmm... nothing. A little violent but nothing you haven't seen before. On a different note, I will not be writing about the battles fought by the members of Team Gai, nor will I go into too much detail regarding what happened to Gaara when the Shuukaku was being dragged out of him by that strange jutsu used by the Akatsuki. It's already in the manga and anime, and there's no need to repeat it here.

I sincerely apologise for the long wait for this second chapter. As some of you may know, I took a few months off to concentrate on revamping my website. It took longer than expected, hence the silence for several months from me. However, it is finished now (or as completed as it can be for the moment), and I can finally divert some attention to this forgotten fic.

My god, 32 reviews (and counting) for just one chapter and all of them saying "update soon"! Yes, I got the message. So here it is, the 2nd chapter of Trials of Faith. Enjoy.

Chapter 1

Sasuke glared silently at the smug looking Hokage sitting in front of him. Tsunade tried to look professional, shuffling paper around her desk to look busy but not exactly accomplishing it. Of course, the smug smile on her face wasn't helping the matter.

Gritting his teeth in irritation, Sasuke managed to growl out a response in a seemingly controlled manner. "It's been two weeks since my return. Although I may be a Genin in name ONLY, but my team also consists of a Jounin and a Chuunin. WHY do you still have us fighting off pathetic bandits on the outskirts of the country? Hell, you still have me chasing that damn CAT!"

Tsunade lifted a delicate eyebrow. "My, are you questioning my orders, Uchiha?" She asked in a calm voice, but with an undertone of danger.

Sakura quickly slapped her hand across Sasuke's mouth, saving him from the thumping Tsunade would have eventually given him. "No, Tsunade-Shisho. Sasuke isn't questioning your orders at all, he's just requesting NICELY if he could possibly have something... more challenging. That's all." Sakura clamped her hands over Sasuke's mouth tightly, eliciting some pain in the jaw of the last Uchiha, effectively shutting him up.

When Sakura finally released her hand, she smiled evilly at Sasuke. "Isn't that right, Sasuke-kun?" She asked in an eerily cheerful manner, totally concealing her deadly killing intent if he didn't agree with her immediately.

All Sasuke could do was nod somewhat half-heartedly as he rubbed his aching jaw, making a further mental note to never cross either Tsunade or Sakura ever again. Using their bare hands, they could crush boulders, let alone his jaw.

"Fine. If Kakashi is in agreement, I can give you three your new mission. It's a B-rank mission that will basically have you three traversing the borders of Fire Country and Rock Country as sentries. Keep an eye out for any Shinobis that come close to the border, warn them of their impending nearness, but DO NOT engage in any fights. I don't want a war!" Tsunade was just about to give Team Kakashi their next assignment when the doors to her office suddenly slammed open, revealing a haggard looking interpreter from the Information Division.

"Hokage-sama! Terrible news! Suna! Suna has been attacked by the Akatsuki, and their Kazekage has been kidnapped!" The interpreter shouted even as she gasped for more breath.

Eyes sharpening with focus, Tsunade withdrew the piece of paper she was about to hand out to Team Kakashi. Once the paper was back on her table, she directed her gaze at Kakashi. "Team Kakashi. Change of plans. You are to go immediately to the Sand, find out the situation, and relay it to Konoha. After that, follow the orders of the Sand and back them up. GO!"

It didn't take long for the members of Team Kakashi to race home, pack the necessities and rush back to the Western gates in preparation to leave. Upon arrival at the gates, they found an agitated Temari and a focussed Shikamaru waiting for them. It seems that the Hokage had managed to relay the information to Temari, hence her presence and impending return to her homeland. Although Shikamaru had not been given permission to go with Team Kakashi to retrieve the Kazekage, at the very least, he was here to see his girl-friend off. He had a firm arm around Temari's shaking shoulders, but the warmth of his body was enough to calm her down slightly.

"Let's go." There was no more need for words, as Kakashi jumped off into the distance, followed by Sasuke and Sakura. Temari paused for a second before turning around, giving Shikamaru one last hug and a quick kiss on his cheek before she too turned around to return home. Just before she jumped away from the gates, Shikamaru

called out to her. "Believe in Gaara. He will make it!" A thin smile graced her face as she leapt into the forest, leaving behind her foundation in order to face her shattered family.

Behind them, Shikamaru's tight fist shook with anger. He wanted to follow them, he wanted so desperately to follow them, but his teammates were busy and scattered elsewhere, leaving him alone without a team. And the Hokage's decree that no Shinobi were allowed to go on missions alone didn't help any. / *Please be safe, Temari! Everyone... /*

Pushing his students to the brink of exhaustion, Team Kakashi and the Sand delegate Temari, managed to reach Suna within 2 days, which was a record in itself.

"Temari-sama!" The scout on the walls of Suna shouted in happiness. "Temari-sama. You're back!"

"Give me a status update NOW!" Temari commanded back, not in the mood to deal with newbie Chuunins and their admiration of her rank.

Straightening up quickly, the scout addressed his superior officer in a professional manner. "Two Akatsuki members infiltrated Suna about 3 days ago. The Kazekage discovered their presence and started an air battle with one of the members. The enemy then dropped some sort of bomb over Suna territory and if it wasn't for the Kazekage's sand, Suna would have suffered terrible losses. Unfortunately, it was also that one action which cost the Kazekage his victory. By midmorning, the Kazekage had lost the battle and was last seen carried away by a strange giant bird summon the enemy uses. Baki-san sent trackers after the Kazekage of course, but most of them never came back. The one that was found alive was Kankuro-sama, and he wasn't faring very well last I heard. Ino-sama has been in the Hospital treating Kankuro-sama."

Temari's heart tightened as she listened to the scout's report. Not only had one of her brothers been kidnapped; but another had been badly hurt, enough to warrant Ino's help. "We have to hurry." Her voice was tight and she increased her speed as she ran towards the hospital, followed by the rest of the Konoha Shinobis.

Slamming the door opened, Temari took in the sights immediately, but the scene in front of her didn't look as desperate as what she had heard from the scout. Lying unconscious on the hospital bed was her brother – Kankuro. His head was bandaged slightly, and he was sleeping calmly with a blanket covering most of his body. Standing beside him was Chiyo-basama and Baki, both looking focussed, as if contemplating serious thoughts.

"Baki-sensei, Chiyo-basama! Kankuro. How is Kankuro?" Temari's voice almost cracked as her desperation rose for more information.

"Temari? I see you're back." Stiffening slightly at seeing the familiar face of Kakashi, Chiyo did not feel comfortable standing anywhere near the son of the man who took the life of her son. She nodded politely if stiffly to the white haired man and smoothly moved out of the room. It wasn't that she hated Kakashi particularly; he just brought back bad memories, memories regarding her loss.

She had first met Kakashi almost 2 and a half years ago when she was reunited with Tsunade, her greatest rival at the Kuunoki Chuunin Examination Tournament, and to say she was shocked at the man's appearance was an understatement. She almost attacked him right in front of all the delegates and important Daimyo's. However, she reigned in her anger the moment Tsunade berated the Copy Ninja on his routine tardiness. It took her a long time to reconcile the fact that he wasn't her enemy. In fact, it took her a very long time to stop being suspicious of everything any Konoha Ninja did, and it was all due to the introduction of a certain Yamanaka.

When Ino first arrived at Suna as the semi-permanent delegate from Konoha, Chiyo was furious and suspicious of the young teenager.

Suffice to say, the two did not get along well at first. However, after a certain incident, the two somehow reconciled their differences, and made a pact together that they would do anything to protect Suna. It was due to that one desire which bonded the two kunoichis, which eventually led them to forming a teacher-student relationship. Now, Chiyo was proud to call Ino her apprentice – not in the arts of puppetry, but in the medical arts and poisons. In fact, in the last year alone, Ino had even surpassed Chiyo in almost everyway concerning the medical arts. The young girl was the epitome of what a Kunoichi should be, and Chiyo was extremely proud of her.

Ignoring Chiyo's silent retreat from the hospital room, Baki decided to explain everything to Temari and the Konoha Shinobis. Although he had been surprised at Sasuke's inclusion, he did not say anything about the last Uchiha. Releasing a deep sigh, Baki started on his narration. "At 0600 three days ago, we first noticed the Kazekage having confronted an Akatsuki member in the skies over Suna. As per the intelligence report from Jiraiya-sama, the Akatsuki member was wearing a full body cloak, black in colour with red clouds."

Sasuke suddenly interrupted Baki with a question. "What did this Akatsuki member look like?" His fist tightened in anxiety. He wasn't sure whether or not he wanted the enemy to be his brother; he wasn't sure whether he's ready to face his brother at this point in time.

Baki glanced at Sasuke slightly before answering the question. "The man was of average height, with long blonde hair tied in a high ponytail. He was too far away for me to see his eye colour or anything like that, but you can ask Ino-san. She at least managed to scratch the bastard while the rest of us just stood out of the way." Glaring angrily, Baki swallowed the lump of self-hate and feelings of worthlessness, burying it with the rest of his resentment of not being able to help the situation at all. He continued with the rest of his narrative. "The man was a long-range fighter using homing explosives shaped into birds. He uses a special type of clay that is used to shape the birds and by activating a one handed seal, the

bird transfers into its full life counterpart. Another one-handed seal will result in the bird exploding."

Straightening his back, Baki continued his explanation. "At first, the Kazekage had the upper hand. But then, the enemy escaped Gaara's sand and started flying low, towards ground level. Gaara's sand followed but it was difficult for him to keep his sand tracking the enemy while avoiding civilians that were on the road. That's when Ino-san joined the battle and managed to scare the Akatsuki member back into the air. The enemy then produced a large bomb and dropped it from the sky directly into the centre of Suna. The Kazekage somehow managed to summon enough sand to protect the whole of suna from the deadly attack. But with his attention on the protection of Suna, Gaara was left vulnerable to attack by the enemy. That's when he was captured and carted away on the bird the Akatsuki member was standing on."

"We tried to follow but was stopped by the collapse of Suna's main entrance. You know that there is only one entrance to Suna, and somehow the second Akatsuki member had booby-trapped the entire place. Kankuro and a few other ninjas managed to survive the traps and carried on with retrieving the Kazekage, while the rest of us stayed behind to try and clear up the debris and treat the injured. It was later when the second tracker team went out that we found Kankuro, poisoned and left in the desert to die. However, all was not lost. Kankuro managed to identify the second Akatsuki member – Akasuna no Sasori." Baki answered in a grave voice.

"When we brought Kankuro back to the hospital, I immediately had Chiyo-basama, our resident Poison Master to look him over, but she was unable to help. That's when Ino-san stepped in once more. She managed to retract most of the poison from Kankuro's body, but there are still some trace amounts inside his bloodstream. She's been working hard at the greenhouse trying to develop an antidote to the new poison." Looking directly at Sakura, Baki requested: "She asked that if Haruno-san was sent by the Hokage, that Haruno-san

should go straight to the greenhouse and assist her in the development of the antidote."

"Right." With a sharp nod, Sakura turned around and left the hospital room quickly. Although Ino was gifted in many areas, and was a brilliant Medical Ninja in her own right; Sakura had been Tsunade's personal apprentice and had trained under Dokudes Ryoko – unanimously renowned as the best Medic-nin in all the elemental countries. Sakura knew that if there was anything Ino missed, she would find it.

Back in Kankuro's medical room, the discussions continued on. "What can you tell me about that second Akatsuki member – Akasuna no Sasori. I believe he was a missing nin from Suna, correct?" Kakashi asked calmly.

Baki nodded in acknowledgement. "Akasuna no Sasori was a genius puppet user, and the grandson of Chiyo-basama. He left his station and disappeared about 20 or so years ago and was later listed down as an S-class criminal due to his special skills in puppetry. You see, Sasori's mastery of the Puppet arts was so great that he managed to develop a new type of puppets – human puppets, called Hitokugutsu. Basically, he uses the corpse of a deceased ninja and turns it into a puppet. This puppet however, still has the original chakra circulatory system inside them, which enables them to use the same techniques that their human counterpart could use. At the time of his disappearance, he had created about 9 human puppets, most of which were left behind. That's all I know for sure, Chiyo-basama may be able to give you more information."

Looking to Kakashi, this time it was Sasuke that asked a question. "How will we find these Akatsuki guys? Do we have a clue as to where they went?"

This time, Baki grinned fiercely. "We found Kankuro lying in the desert south-east of Suna. He was able to collect a piece of cloth from Akasuna no Sasori. I believe you are a master tracker, am I correct, Kakashi-dono?" Baki asked and Kakashi could only grin and

nod in acceptance. "Then there is no problem." Gazing once more at Kankuro's sleeping form, Baki signed yet again. "I probably should go back and report to the council. I will see you both later. With Haruno-san and Ino-san working on the antidote, I have no doubt that it would be completed soon." Bowing in respect, Baki quickly left the room.

Temari then took a seat next to her sleeping brother, holding his hands tightly, willing the girls to get back as soon as possible. Kakashi and Sasuke silently left Temari to her vigil, both creeping out of the hospital room to grant her some privacy.

"Phew. Got it! Thanks for that, Forehead. I never would have been able to create three antidote capsules if you hadn't arrived in the nick of time. I got the majority of the antidote matrix figured out, but I'm not experienced enough in brewing it accurately. I may have wasted the other two capsules in order to get the third one just right." Ino smiled tiredly as she slumped against the table while sitting on the only stool in the greenhouse laboratory.

Sakura snorted at the old nickname. "Is that any way to thank someone, calling them names?" She grumbled childishly.

"Humph. You're one to talk. You brought that red-eyed freak with you, didn't you? Give a girl a break." Ino's eyes turned uncharacteristically angry. Even after all these years, she still didn't feel compelled to forgive the last Uchiha for his assault on her when she had participated in the team that went out to retrieve him back from joining the Sound Village. Suffice to say, she had been severely disillusioned with the whole last Uchiha fandom, and had turned her attentions to bigger fish – namely, the youngest Kazekage in the history of the Sand.

Sakura gave a heavy sigh, having known her best friend in so many years, she knew that the relationship between Ino and Sasuke was irreparably damaged, and the two would probably never be more than distant acquaintances, if at all. However, that doesn't mean she

enjoys being the middle person between the two stubborn shinobi. In fact, she was getting tired of always being the one to calm the two down from ringing each other's neck. It was becoming tedious. Shaking her head to clear her thoughts, Sakura tried to get her best friend to reveal more of what happened. "Hey. Baki mentioned that you managed to 'scratch' the enemy while the rest of the Suna Shinobis were unable to do anything. What the hell did he mean by that? What actually happened?" She asked in all curiosity.

This time, it was Ino that signed sadly. "I did my best, but it wasn't enough to protect Gaara.

(FLASHBACK)

An explosion was heard in the distance. Both Ino and Chiyo looked towards the direction that the sound had originated and saw a sight that horrified them. Gaara was floating on a mass of sand in the middle of the sky summoning forth a mountain of sand to back him up as he fought a strange man in a cloak with red clouds patterns on it. The enemy was standing on a giant white bird like creature that looked anything but natural. However, the creature was versatile and fast, fast enough to avoid most Gaara's sand as the enemy weaved in and out of the sand barrages that went their way. Ino and Chiyo immediately dropped everything that they were doing to head towards the Kazekage, thinking up any way they could help the situation.

Ino skidded to a stop on top of one of the tallest buildings in Suna, watching anxiously as the enemy weaved in, out, around and beneath most of the buildings of Suna, interrupting the lives of Suna civilians while actively avoiding Gaara's sand pursuit. She gritted her teeth in anger as she tightened her fist in determination. It didn't matter to her that she was jumping into a battle between an S-class criminal and the Kazekage. All she wanted to do was help Gaara in anyway she can. And if that meant distracting the enemy so that Gaara could get in a direct hit then so be it.

Watching closely as the enemy flew closer towards her location. Raising her right hand, Ino shot forth five metallic needles, each with ninja wires attached to them from the mechanical bracelet on Ino's wrist. The needles pierced through the hardened walls of the building across from Ino, and she strengthened the ninja wire with her chakra, just a few seconds before the Akatsuki's summoned creature slammed across it. The impact between the furiously flying creature and the ninja wires that Ino had fired forced the needles to lose their grip upon the stone wall, and literally pulled Ino right off her feet towards the direction of the bird's flight. Quickly readjusting herself to the sudden momentum, Ino launched five more needles from her other hand, which struck the back of the giant clay bird's leg, and then, she hung on for dear life.

Gritting her teeth, Ino tried her very best to avoid any incoming obstacles as the Akatsuki and his summoned bird continued to weave between buildings. She knew that her additional weight must be slowing the summons speed down in flight, but any little bit helps as she watched in the corner of her eyes, Gaara's sand creeping closer and closer to the enemy and her.

Above her, Deidara had already noticed the extra weight drawing down his summon and glared at her opening. He mentally commanded the creature to weave ever so closely to the surrounding buildings, doing sharp turns on every corner. Ino was forced to project chakra from every pore of her body, creating a semi-kaiten in order to protect her from smashing against solid walls, metallic signs and various people dodging out of the way.

/I can't hold on forever./ She thought to herself, before coming to a decision. Closing her eyes in concentration, Ino released a spark of electrically charged chakra and let it race up the thin ninja wire towards the enemy's bird summon. The point of contact was immediate and devastating. In mid flight, the clay bird suddenly exploded, blasting both Deidara and Ino in two different directions due to the force of the blast.

Quickly righting himself and ignoring the shearing burns upon his body, Deidara called forth yet a second bird summon, activated it into its larger version and landed on it as gracefully as he could, looking as battered as he was. Most of Deidara's coat had been burnt off, and he had second degree burns all over his legs and part of his chest. Black burns and cuts littered his once smooth face. Suffice to say, Deidara was not happy that his beautiful piece of art work (his former bird summon) was destroyed before he commanded it to. Art is only a blast if he himself created it after all. /That women will DIE!/ He swore to himself angrily as he made his summon fly straight up into the atmosphere.

Having been blasted away resulting in her tumbling through the air in all directions, Ino was just starting to brace herself for impact when she was caught by something soft but dry. Opening her eyes, she let lose a sign of relief as the familiar sand particles surrounded her and gently dropped her down on top of a near by building. /Thanks Gaara. For saving my life again./ She thought to herself even as she blushed slightly in embarrassment at having to need his help once again. Shaking those thoughts away, she refocused her efforts on the enemy, whom had now flown quite high up into the air, too far for her to reach with her lightning attacks or ninja wire. /Damn! I wish I had a long distance attack!/ She swore but could only stand as watch as the man of her dreams drifted further and further away from her towards the enemy.

From a distance she was able to watch as the Akatsuki created yet another summoned bird, this time, larger than all the other summoned birds that he had produced in the past. This new summon was strange in appearance. It looked like a double faced owl, ugly and strange looking. Suddenly, the bird-shaped bomb dropped straight down towards the heart of Suna. And Ino's heart literally leapt to her throat in fear. /Oh No! He's going to destroy the SAND!/ And just as Ino predicted, the giant bomb exploded into a supernova of heat and flames, rocked with the sounds of a sonic eruption equal to a volcano's wrath. Ino could do nothing else but cover her face with her arms bracing for impact and hoped that she

survive whatever debris that were flying towards her direction. After 5 long seconds of waiting, she finally found the courage to open her eyes to watch her impending doom.

What she saw truly awed her beyond any expectation.

(END FLASHBACK)

"Gaara had summoned a mountain of sand and protected the village from the entire blast radius of the Akatsuki's attack. It took every ounce of energy for him to control such a large mass of sand and then move it away from the village so that when he let go of it, it won't smash down onto the village like a rain of rocks." Ino paused in her explanation, her eyes dimmed slightly in memory. "But the distraction had worked. Gaara was exhausted after protecting Suna like that, and in a quick move, Akatsuki had captured him. I had wanted to go after them myself but then there was a series of explosions in and around the Suna entrance, blocking anyone from going out. There were several people seriously injured, and I stayed back to help them. By the time I had finished with the healing and was preparing to leave, Kankuro was brought back on the brink of death. Since then, I've been working closely with Chiyo-basama on figuring out a cure for Kankuro."

Slumping into her seat, Ino's arms shook slightly as she finally found time to release the tension that had been building up inside her heart for the last three days. "I'm scared, Sakura." She whispered to her old friend. "I'm scared that by the time we find him... he's gone. I can't... I can't lose him... Not like this."

Sakura remained silent, but she pulled the shaking Ino into her arms in a tight embrace. "It's going to be okay, Ino. We'll save him. I swear it. We will save him."

Early the next morning, all three members of Team Kakashi were ready to set off towards the direction that Pakkun had said he could follow the scent of the Kazekage. Ino originally had wanted to come

along as well, but was persuaded to stay behind (or ordered to more like) by Chiyo; the reasons being that her medical skills were still needed to administer the rest of Kankuro's ailments. Temari, too, had been forced to stay behind as one of the few high-ranking Jounins, able to watch the border of the country in case of any invasions. Within minutes, Team Kakashi and Chiyo of Suna jumped away from the now clean entrance to the Suna village, running rapidly towards the borders of river country. They were on a tight schedule and all of them knew that being late would result in a catastrophe, not just for Suna, but perhaps the whole world depending on what Akatsuki's plans are.

Somewhere far in the distance and hidden behind an enclosed cavern large enough to hold thousands of worshippers, the members of Akatsuki convene for the first stage of their plan.

"You're late." A shadowed figure stated plainly. "Prepare it immediately."

Turning his back to the two Akatsuki members who had just arrived at their location, the obvious leader of the group performed a series of hand seals before placing his hands upon the ground of the darkened chamber. In a sudden burst of smoke cloud a giant monument erupted from the earth. Seemingly made of wood, the giant monument showed the features of a nine-eyed monster head with its teeth clenching a metallic scroll like object. Its human like hands were also visible, holding up its fingers in a prayer like motion, both wrists were chained together by a strong chain.

Performing another hand seal, the leader of the Akatsuki spoke: "Assemble." And immediately, six other shadowed members appeared upon the finger tips of the monument. The Akatsuki leader himself, Deidara and Sasori ball jumped to their respective positions atop the other finger tips of the statue, leaving only Gaara's comatose form upon the ground. "Now, let us begin."

"Hey, um... I know this may seem like a stupid question, but why does the Akatsuki want Gaara?" Surprisingly, it was Sasuke who asked the question, having only had one encounter with his brother and never really understanding what the aims of Akatsuki were. He was simply curious and knew that this information would be vital for the success of this mission.

"You don't know?!" Sakura queried back, surprised. But when she took some time to think about it, she realised. "Yeah, you weren't here when Tsunade gave us the explanation about 6 months ago."

Sasuke frowned. "What explanation?" He snapped back grumpily.

"You may or may not be aware, but Gaara is what we call a 'Jinchuriki', Power of the Human Sacrifice. Basically, he is a container of a tailed-beast, namely the Ichibi no Shukaku." Chiyo's grave voice answered.

Sasuke only frowned further in confusion. "What the hell is a 'Jinchuriki'? What is a tailed beast? Is it that giant thing that Gaara turned into when he fought Naruto back during the Konoha Chuunin Exams (1)?"

"What?! You call yourself a Shinobi and you don't know that?" Chiyo sneered at the last Uchiha, having heard from Ino about Sasuke's betrayal during his youth, she was more than suspicious about his intentions and was not comfortable working closely with him.

"The information regarding the 'Nine Tails' are top secret materials in Konoha, no one above High Chuunin are privy to the information, so it's not surprising that Sasuke doesn't know." Kakashi interrupted the conversation before a verbal fight could escalate.

"I suppose so..." Chiyo muttered under her breath before she decided to continue. "The 'Tailed Beasts' are in fact magical beasts, often referred to as demons, which possess tails. The Sand has always possessed the 'One-Tail'; that is the Ichibi no Shukaku. Through out history, there are a total of Nine 'Tailed Beasts' in this

world. Each one differs in characteristics, depending on the number of 'tails' they have. The Ichibi no Shukaku possesses only 'one' tail. The Nibi no Nekotama possesses 'two' tails. And so on and so forth until the Kyuubi no Kitsune which possesses all 'nine' tails. The 'Tailed Beasts' are a monstrous formation of demonic Chakra, or as some people call it 'Chaos energy'. During the Ninja wars, every hidden village attempted to acquire their power for military purposes. They competed to attain these beasts. However..." Here, Chiyo's voice turned grave while her eyes turned sad. "No one can truly control such power, they are beyond the ability of men. I've yet to understand why Akatsuki attempts to acquire such power... they are simply too dangerous. Well, even through the time of peace, the ages shift on. I've heard that all the 'tailed beasts' are scattered across the world. (2)"

Sasuke remained silent for a moment before he turned his attentions to Sakura. "If these demonic beasts were so powerful, why weren't they turned into those Tenkun no Buki that Naruto always wield. They obviously would have been a far better 'weapon' than being sealed inside a human. And why would you seal a demon into a human anyway? That's just... cruel..."

Sakura glared slightly at Sasuke, having been reminded of those terrible weapons. "It's not that easy Sasuke. From what I remember of reading the historical texts at the Kuunoki Library, it is true that the Uzumaki leader managed to create weapons with the souls and power of demons sealed in them, these weapons are known as the Tenkun no Buki. There are only ten in existence in this entire world. But as Naruto has already explained before, not everyone can wield these weapons and stay sane. Most had been consumed by the power of the weapons and became a puppet of the weapons or simply went insane. The Uzumaki line is the only family line who can 'safely' use the weapon, and I use that term VERY loosely, because it was the blood of an Uzumaki that was used in the blood seals in the first place."

"Having proven that creating weapons out of demons are more hazardous than fruitful, the Uzumaki leader abandoned that path and turned his attention to sealing the demons into another world – the Makai. As you know, they were successful in driving out the majority of demon kind away from this world and into another. However, that didn't mean they got rid of ALL demons. In fact, it was recorded down that right after the demon wars finished, there was still around 300 years of turmoil where lesser demons (mostly D and C class demons) (3) were hunted down by the humans of those times and killed off. There were also records of Hanyou's being born around those times as well. 'Hanyou' are half-demon, half-human kind. They look like humans but also have either special abilities of their demon heritage or they can transform parts of their body to showcase their demon heritage. The Hanyous were the left over demon's attempt to safely merge into a largely human society. Some Hanyous managed to survive, even till today, and are the forefathers of what we commonly term today as 'Bloodline' clans. Others did not. And so ends the history of demon kind in this world that has become the domain of humans." Sakura paused in order for everyone to reflect upon the large bomb of information that she had just given them.

"Are you saying..." Sasuke stuttered slightly in shock. "That all bloodline clans... originally came from... Demons?" The truth may have been a little too much for him to handle.

"That is only one theory." Sakura tried to relieve her teammate but knew that the truth is not so easily silenced. "But many original bloodline clans within the Kuunoki village had been able to trace their family line to at least one Hanyou survivor. However, that is not to say that they are not humans. They are very much humans, it's just that in their DNA, there is one tiny, TINY remnant of their demonic ancestors. And truthfully, it is these demonic remnants that make Bloodline clans as feared and as powerful as they are today. You should not feel ashamed or embarrassed about your history. Almost every single person in this world will have at least some contact with the old blood of Hanyous, its just that in Bloodline clans,

they are manifested in a more visual, and powerful means." Sakura assured the last Uchiha.

Taking a deep breath and releasing it out with the rest of his stress, Sasuke decided to stuff this information to the back of his mind until a later date. He needed to concentrate on the task at hand. "Okay, so we know that some demons were left behind from the Demon Wars, and managed to leave behind descendants. But what about the Tailed Beasts, how did they survive the Demon Wars? And none of you have answered me regarding why these 'Jinchuriki' were created?"

This time, Sakura bit her lip in hesitation. "I tried to find that out too, but all the historical texts at the Kuunoki Library said was that there was some sort of 'deal' made between the Uzumaki leader and the 9 powerful beasts. Supposedly, the Tailed beasts had promised to do something for the Uzumaki leader, and in return, they alone were allowed to stay in this world, provided that they didn't wreck havoc everywhere they go."

Sasuke frowned again. "But that doesn't make sense. Didn't the Kyuubi no Kitsune attack Konoha several times in the last 100 years. Wouldn't that be a breach of whatever contract that was held between the Uzumaki and the Tailed Beast? And how would this deal uphold considering during the Ninja wars, almost every hidden village (other than the Kuunoki) tried to capture a Tailed Beast for their own use?"

Chiyo gave a deep sigh. "Such is probably why the Kuunoki shut their doors to the outside world for so long. The other hidden villages had no knowledge of this 'pact' between the Uzumaki and Bijyu (Tailed Beast), hence why we sought them out, provoked them, and in the end, managed to capture them and use them for our own purposes. In a way, much of the damage caused by Bijyu's is a direct result of them retaliating against our mistreatment of them, be they Jinchuriki or otherwise."

"As for the Kyuubi no Kitsune; that was a man-made disaster."
Kakashi noted quietly by the side of the team.

"Huh?" This time, it was Sakura who looked curiously at Kakashi.
"What do you mean, Kakashi-sense? I know that when Kyuubi attacked Konoha around 15 years ago, the Yondaime defeated it and sealed it within Naruto, but what does..."

Her question was immediately cut off by one of Sasuke's. "What? What's this about the Kyuubi sealed inside Naruto?" Sasuke called out in alarm, having never heard this news before.

"You mean you didn't know about that either?!" Sakura looked back at Sasuke with a shocked look on her face, and Kakashi could only sigh in reply.

Bloating his face up and flushing in embarrassment, Sasuke barked out in a harsh tone of voice. "EXPLAIN!"

"Like I said before, the Bijyu have inconceivable power. Every country wanted to use them for military affairs. A 'Jinchuriki' is something created to control that power." Chiyo answered as best she could.

"I thought you said no one could control such power?" Sasuke mumbled unhappily, having been kept in the dark about all this information.

"That is how it is yes. But human greed for power knows no bounds. Over time, people have tried to control that power... by sealing the Bijyu into humans. By doing that, the overwhelming power of the Bijyu is compressed and that power could be directed by a human mind. And for those poor souls that had Bijyu sealed in them, like Gaara, came to be known as Jinchuriki. The power of human sacrifice, a fitting name, don't you think?" Pausing in forlornness, Chiyo shook her head in order to be rid of her past regrets.
"Jinchuriki are characterised by being able to tap into an

unimaginable power by resonating with the Bijyu. Though out Suna's history, there have been three Jinchuriki, including Gaara."

"Then what about Naruto?" Sasuke asked in a quiet voice, suddenly dreading the answer.

Sakura gave Kakashi a look, and the older man sighed. "You know, it's an A-class penalty punishable by death if I break the Hokage's law. Basically, only 2 people can talk about this, Naruto-himself, and the Hokage. All I can say is a few facts. 1. The first time the Kyuubi no Kitsune was sighted invading Konoha territory was over 60 years ago, when the great deserter – Uchiha Madara summoned the great beast to attack Konoha. At the time, the Shodai Hokage was able to subdue the Kyuubi, Madara was defeated, and both disappeared afterwards. It was commonly believed that Madara died that day. But now, we're not so sure. 2. The Kyuubi no Kitsune reappeared about 15 years ago, and this time, it was stopped by the Yondaime Hokage. But as you already know, it's not so easy to destroy a demon, especially one like the Kyuubi. 3. You already know that Jinchuriki's exist. Gaara is a good example. Now make your own conclusions. 4. Naruto's birthday is October 10th, the same day the Kyuubi was defeated." Kakashi said, hinting at the answer without actually saying anything.

Sasuke closed his eyes, hiding his shock, disbelief and other assortment of emotions. When he finally opened his eyes again, they were calm. "Why weren't we told?"

"For Naruto's own protection." That was all Kakashi could say, and Sasuke accepted that.

The rest of the journey was taken in silence.

Within the dark cavern, the tall man with strange claw like appendages surrounding his head suddenly spoke up. "There are currently 2 teams of Shinobi heading our way, one from the west -

lead by Konoha's Maito Gai. The other from the east, is lead by Copy-Cat Kakashi."

"Zetsu, who are the rest of the squad members?" The supposedly leader asked in a firm but almost nonchalant way, as if he was not concerned about enemies coming his way.

"Maito Gai's team consist of his original team members – Hyuuga Neji, Rock Lee and Tenten. For Kakashi's team, there is Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura and I believe a delegate from Suna – Chiyo." The newly named Zetsu, still shadowed in darkness replied.

"Heh. Let me go deal with them. I'm more than happy to give a few more sacrifices to Jashin-sama." Another shadowed person spoke out in an arrogant tone of voice.

"No. Leave Maito Gai and his team to me. I have a personal Vendetta against that bizarre beast of Konoha." Yet another shadowed figure spoke forth, interrupting the previous one.

"So be it. Kisame, you deal with Maito Gai and his squad. After all, that jutsu was practically made for you as you have a large amount of Chakra even among us Akatsuki members. However, remember that I will need at least 30 percent of your chakra for the demon extraction." The remaining Akatsuki members silently as the newly revealed Kisame suddenly turn silent, as if his mind was hundreds of miles away. The Leader turned his attention upon the next item of issue. "Now, who will deal with the other squad?"

"I will go." A soft voice spoke forth, but this single statement immediately silenced all other protests.

"Good. Then you go." The leader confirmed and then all was quiet once again.

Upon landing into a clearing in the middle of the forest, all four members of the rescue team paused as they noticed the person

standing before them.

"You!" Sasuke snarled, his eyes blazing red with a fully formed Sharingan.

"Those eyes..." Chiyo muttered from her place behind the other Konoha ninjas.

"Well, this is a surprise..." Kakashi commented calmly as he pulled up and exposed his own single Sharingan eye.

"Kakashi-sensei. Who is he?" Sakura asked, her gaze shifting from her team mate's furious look to her sensei's calm visage.

"Uchiha Itachi!" Sasuke spat the words out with disgust, but unlike his childhood-self, he did not immediately rush forward to try his luck at killing his brother. Instead, he stayed put waiting for Kakashi's orders. Even now, he knew he was still no match for the other Uchiha, and he did not look forward to yet another humiliating defeat at his brother's hand.

Sakura's eyes widened at the implications. */ This person is Uchiha Itachi? The one who killed off the entire Uchiha clan? The one whose been after Naruto? /* Her eyes hardened and she tightened her fist in preparation for the upcoming fight.

Standing opposite them, Itachi spoke calmly. "It has been awhile, Kakashi-san, Otouto."

"Don't call me that! I am NOT your brother!" Sasuke vehemently denounced, but again, he did not rush forward in a fit of rage, he stayed back with Kakashi.

"Well, looks like there's no holding back with such an opponent, neh?" Kakashi sighed a little, eyes never leaving that of Itachi. "All of you listen up, don't look at his eyes or else you'll immediately be pulled into a Genjutsu. We must attack him while focussing on his legs and or body movements. Sasuke, up front with me! Sakura,

Chiyo-sama, please stay behind as backup." With that said, Kakashi and Sasuke suddenly rushed forward to attack Itachi.

From Itachi's sleeve, the Konoha traitor pulled out hundreds of shuriken and threw them all towards Kakashi and Sasuke as they rushed towards him. Sasuke ran in front of Kakashi, pulled out his dual Dao Sword and performed a defensive dance, swinging his two swords around at high speed, effectively deflecting all of Itachi's thrown weapons. Sasuke then bent forward by his waist, giving Kakashi the advantage of surprise as the older man vaulted over the teenager and landed a kick at Itachi. Itachi blocked Kakashi's kick with a forearm, but had to quickly jump backwards to avoid a low swing of Sasuke's broad swords. Somersaulting in mid air, Itachi performed a few quick hand seals before landing and releasing a giant fireball towards the two Konoha ninjas. "Katon: Goukakyu no Jutsu! (Fire Element: Grand Fireball technique!)

Sasuke stabbed both his swords into the ground before slapping both his palms together. Kneeling down onto his knees, Sasuke then pushed his still clasped hands forward horizontally facing the giant fireball flying his way. Summoning all he had learnt of the fire bending technique, Sasuke shouted "HA!" as he released his own highly density, high heat blue flames in a thin but sharp razor arc against Itachi's fireball. The giant fireball didn't stand a chance and was immediately sliced into two parts, flying pass Sasuke leaving the younger Uchiha unharmed. Behind Sasuke, Kakashi dug underground to escape the flames while Sakura and Chiyo had jumped aside to save themselves. Suffice to say, when the two halves of the fireball landed against the ground, they both exploded into an outbreak of colour, noise, dust and flames.

Less than a second later, Kakashi burst out of the ground directly in front of their enemy. Itachi bent backwards to avoid Kakashi's high punch and grabbing onto Kakashi's sleeve, Itachi pulled the man down and readied his own punch. Kakashi managed to duck beneath Itachi's punch but the back of his head was then grabbed

and pulled towards Itachi's face, looking directly into a pair of Mangekyou Sharingan eyes.

In an instant, Kakashi found himself trapped in the Tsukiyomi dimension, his body as flat as paper and slowly starting to burn from his legs up. Kakashi looked calmly towards Itachi who was standing before him. "I was under the impression that using that eye too much would be a danger to you, Itachi-kun. Tell me, how far have you're eyesight gone?"

Inside the world of the Tsukiyomi, Itachi narrowed his eyes at Kakashi's calm visage. "You truly are a genius, Kakashi-senpai. For one who had been under my technique only once, you've already begun to detect its flaws. I applaud you."

Kakashi gave Itachi an uncharacteristic closed eyed smile, even as half of his body had already burnt away into ash. "I don't deserve such credit; it was Naruto who informed me that those Mangekyou eyes have such a flaw in them. Most Doujutsu (eye techniques) does, including the Yochigan. I would tell you not to use those eyes so frivolously, but then again, you wouldn't listen to me anyway..."

"I see. Because you concealed yourself beneath the ground, I didn't see you until it was too late."

In the real world, the Kakashi that was trapped within Itachi's Genjutsu suddenly grabbed onto Itachi's sleeve, preventing the younger man from escaping.

A few metres away from the two, another Kakashi climbed his way out of the ground. "Hit him and my Kage Bunshin (Shadow Clone) together in one attack, Sasuke!" Kakashi commanded in a no-nonsense tone of voice.

"I already know that!" Sasuke exclaimed as he stabbed one of his trusty swords right through Kakashi's shadow clone, dispelling it instantly, and then stabbing the metallic object right into Itachi's heart. "Chidori Nagashi! (Thousand Bird Current!)" Thousands upon

thousands of volts in electricity vibrated against the very air as it shocked Itachi's body with the power of a thunderbolt. The attack lasted a mere millisecond before the charred body of what use to be Itachi fell upon the ground, dead.

Every member of the rescue was surprised by the change of appearance of the body. The physical looks of the corpse (that they had thought was Itachi) had changed into someone else, someone completely different. Sakura knelt down to examine the body to make sure it wasn't some sort of medical jutsu, but there was nothing there anymore.

"I don't get it." She muttered in a puzzled voice. "Was it their jutsu... or what?"

"I had a bad feeling about it while I was battling him." Kakashi commented. "It did feel like Itachi... but at times, it didn't as well."

"He..." Chiyo stuttered in shock.

Kakashi looked towards the elder. "Do you know him, Chiyo-sama?"

"He's Yuura. He's a jounin from my village... But I don't understand... He's always been a supporter of Gaara... why... how... I cannot believe that he would betray the village... but, that's the only explanation." Chiyo murmured in a despondent voice.

"Could he have been impersonating Itachi under a henge?" Sakura threw out that idea as it was the only thing she could come up with.

"No." Sasuke answered succinctly. "I think I know Itachi the best, out of all of us. The jutsu he used, both the Tsukiyomi and the Goukakyu were genuine jutsus that he would use. But somehow, it felt... not weaker per say, but more limited... as if he only had a limited source of Chakra to use on hand."

"Hmm... well, let's not waste anymore time on this. We've got a Kage to rescue, remember." Kakashi brought their attention back into

focus and together, all four Shinobis jumped away, back on their journey towards the common goal of rescuing Gaara.

Once both the Kiri Swordsman and the Uchiha prodigy's mind had returned back to the task of extracting the Ichibi no Shukaku, the Leader spoke forth in order to catch everyone's attention. "So, the jutsu has ended I see. However, your efforts had bought us quite a bit of time. Well done, Itachi and Kisame."

"Humph. You make this sound so easy." Sasori grumbled from his station upon one of the giant statue's fingers. "The two men who became sacrifices of your jutsu and lend their bodies were both my subordinates." Loosing another 2 potential puppets, and to such unworthy causes just did not sit well with Sasori, who could have put them into much better use – such as turning them into Hito-Kugutsu (Human puppets) instead.

The leader stayed silent for a time before finally commenting smugly. "With my Shoten no Jutsu (Imitation Shape shifting technique) (4), they became full Akatsuki members, even if only for a short amount of time. He he" The leader's laughter was cut off by another response however.

"Yo Itachi. You don't mind if I play around with your little brother, do you? I just want to see whether all Uchiha's are such an apathetic bunch, unn. You won't mind, I'm sure..." Deidara smirked at the Uchiha prodigy, his eyes gleaming in anticipation.

Itachi simply remained silent. The Leader however, gave Deidara permission. "Do as you wish, but only once the extraction process is finished."

"Hai. Hai... Pein-sama..." Deidara answered mockingly.

All members of team Gai stood before a giant boulder upon the middle of a cliff side against the calm water of medium sized river. All

of them looked a little tired and roughed up, but no one was seriously hurt.

"Gaara is behind that door." Pakkun answered as he stood on the shoulder of Rock Lee.

Neji immediately activated his Byakugan in order to look pass the boulder and into the cave within. What he saw made him gasp in surprise. Tenten, having noticed his companion's suddenly pale complexion, asked in an urgent voice. "What did you see, Neji?"

Neji blinked and released his Byakugan. "It... They... words can't describe it." He finally stuttered.

Taking those words in negative light, Gai immediately ran towards the boulder and thrust his powerful fist against it, only for the giant rock structure to seemingly absorb the force of his punch. The Konoha jounin frowned upon seeing this. "It's a Kekkai (Barrier)." He concluded grimly. "We will need to break the barrier seal before we can go in. Unfortunately, I'm not familiar with this seal and don't know how to break it."

"Gai! It's a Gofuu Kekai (Five Seal Barrier)" Kakashi's voice called out from behind Team Gai as his own squad finally arrived at the destination.

"Heh. You're late as usual, Kakashi." Gai took this opportunity to taunt his rival, even as Kakashi ignored the verbal jab.

"No. No. We ran into a little trouble and were delayed." Kakashi explained with curved eyes.

Turning their full attention towards the barrier once more, Gai spoke in a confident voice. "Well, then. Let's do this! Let's save the Kazekage of Suna!"

End

(1) Faith in Humanity, chapter 18.

(2) Entire explanation copied from Naruto Cannon series Chapter 256, pages 13 and 14, as scanlated by Inane.

(3) Please read Faith in Humanity, chapter 14 for explanation about the rank of demons.

(4) This is the translated name for "Shoten no Jutsu" as described on the Naruto Scanlated manga – volume 29, chapter 260, page 19, by Shannaro.

Okay, first up, please go to my Fanfiction website to check out all the cool pictures I've just uploaded there, including the new look of Ino of the Sand. In my story, Ino is not going to wearing the skimpy purple top and skirt. Obviously, she'll get sunburnt wearing that in Suna, hence I've completely changed her wardrobe. Enjoy!

Lastly, I just need a place to rant. The latest manga release from the Naruto Cannon series is kinda... disappointing. I'm mean, even I'm starting to lose interest in the whole 'traitor turn good turn traitor' idea, and I'm one of the more open-minded people. And, my god, Sasuke is naïve beyond belief. He really would be so easy to manipulate – like a puppet with strings held by multiple people tugging him in all different directions. Stop and think for yourself for a minute! Okay, rant finished.

Aren't you all glad that I've got a manipulator of my own – Ruri. I'd rather place my life in her hands than any other.

The Fate of Jinchuriki II

Trials of Faith

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 3: The Fate of Jinchuriki II

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** ", / *Thoughts* , "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: NARUTO COMES BACK!! Enter Tobi! And... more on the Tenkun no Buki... And I'll be amending the Chiyo & Sakura Vs Sasori fight a little bit. hmm... that's all I can think of.

Chapter 3

"This Gofuu Kekkai (5 part barrier) creates a barrier by having tags with the character "Kin" (Forbidden) written on them placed at five different locations in the area. Obviously the first one is directly in front of us." Kakashi explained while pointing at the small, seemingly innocent piece of paper in front of the giant boulder that is obstructing their entry into the Akatsuki lair.

"The trick is to remove all 5 "Kin" tags, including the one in front of us, all at the same time." Kakashi concluded.

"But... where are the other four tags?" Tenten questioned. Even though she was the only resident seal user in her team, she had never used seals for barrier techniques, only for storing, hence why this information was new to her.

"Neji-kun." Kakashi prompted and Neji immediately activated his Byakugan to full range.

It didn't take him long to find all the other four tags. "One's about 500 metres Northeast, on top of a rock; another 350 metres south-southeast, on the trunk of a riverside tree. The third can be found at about 650 metres northwest, stuck to a Cliffside, and the last one is just under 800 metres southwest, in a grove." Neji finished.

"Right! If that's the range, we'll use these portable radios to communicate. Kakashi, my team is faster than yours, so we'll take care of the tags before rushing back to aid you. Neji, you will have to have your Byakugan activated the whole time and give us directions if we're going the wrong way." Gai ordered in a confident manner and each member of Team Gai, as well as Kakashi placed the delicate ear piece and voice box on their body. "Good. Everyone ready?" His team mates nodded. "Kakashi, the frequency is 174. Right! Let's go!" With a punch in the air, all four members of team Gai disappeared from the waterfront clearing, all rushing towards their various targets.

Due to Team Gai's impressive speed, it only took them all of 5 minutes to find their various targets, Lee having taken the longest due to the distance as well as the difficulty in finding his chosen tag. "Alright everyone, remove the tags in front of you on the count of 3! 3! 2! 1! NOW!"

In synchronisation, Neji, Gai, Lee, Tenten and Kakashi all pulled the delicate piece of paper seal away from their attachment area. Sakura, who had readied herself quickly rushed towards the boulder the moment Kakashi pulled the tag off. Giving a passionate cry, she punched into the stone structure with her might, shattering the rock's surface crumbling and falling haphazardly into the river below. Team

Kakashi didn't waste time as they immediately jumped into the cavern.

Unknown to team Kakashi, the members of Team Gai were now trapped in their own individual fights, hence they would be unable to rush back in time to help them.

"Damn. Too late." Kakashi narrowed his eyes at the two Akatsuki members sitting nonchalantly in front of them. There was a giant of a man crouched down in a hideously deformed fashion. Another man with long blond hair tied to a high ponytail, sitting disrespectfully on the seemingly dead corpse of Gaara. Lastly, behind Gaara's corpse was the giant, white clay bird which was the summon belonging to the blond guy, as described by Baki and Ino.

"Oh. Look, Danna. We have guests." Deidara mockingly welcomed.

"Sasori..." Chiyo's soft voice echoed in the cavern.

Sasori remained silent, but Deidara wanted to play. "Yo, Sasori-danna. Isn't that your good-ol' grandma? Shouldn't you go over there and give the old bag a hug or something?"

"Quiet! Deidara!" Sasori snapped back.

Deidara pouted before focussing his attention on the other members. "Oooh. We've also got the legendary Copy Cat Kakashi and Itachi's little bro..." Here, Deidara's eyes remained on Sasuke's impassive face for a while longer before he thinned his smirk into a determined stare. "Ne, Ne. Danna. Let me play with the little Uchiha. I want to see how far he's come along compared to Itachi-sama."

Sasuke's eyes narrowed dangerously at Deidara's taunt.

"Do whatever you like. I don't care." Sasori answered in a bland voice.

Refocusing his attention to Sasuke, Deidara continued to taunt in a childish but threatening manner. "Hehe. How should I kill you, I wonder? Should I blow you up like a human firework, or should I simmer you down like a bright human fuse. An artist must always seek ever greater inspiration or he'll lose his touch... I've already seen what Itachi-sama can do. Now, let's see if you can even compare, Uchiha-no-boyo (Uchiha boy) (1).

Sasori snorted in a sarcastic manner. "What? You insist on calling those little fireworks of yours art? True art endures the ages... beauty everlasting."

"As a fellow craftsman, Danna... I respect you, but art is in the beauty of that single fleeting moment of destruction!" Deidara retorted passionately.

"Deidara... are you trying to anger me?" Sasori threatened with a deep voice.

"Well, you're the one who's always putting down my art!" Deidara exclaimed in self defence, completely ignoring the four intruders that had invaded their lair. "My art is the explosion itself." Deidara said forcefully, as he gracefully stood up. His pet bird immediately made a move to swallow the body of Gaara. "Quite different from your little puppet shows, Danna!"

In a flick of movement, a strange wooden, mechanical tail suddenly lashed out at Deidara from behind Sasori's form, revealing his mastery of puppetry. Deidara had barely managed to avoid the attack and jump gracefully onto his summon, which had already taken to the sky with Gaara still in its mouth.

"Tch!" Sasori snorted in irritation.

"See you later, Danna!" Deidara cheered before looking at Sasuke and Kakashi once again. "Yo, Uchiha-boyo. Come and face me, show me how weak you are compared to your dear older brother!" His last comment blew Sasuke's fuse. Seeing that he had what he

wanted, Deidara quickly flew out of the cavern and into the sky outside.

"Shut up! I'm not weak! And He's NOT MY BROTHER!" Sasuke screamed at Deidara before trying to rush off after the man, only to have his arm gripped by Kakashi.

Kakashi glared at Deidara who was still flapping around in the air, flying further away with each second he waste, and then turning to look at the formidable Sasori before coming to a decision. He silently pressed into the speaker phone for the portable radio. "Gai? Can you hear me? We need your team back here now!"

"PSSS. That's easier said than done, Kakashi. We're all caught up in the enemy's jutsu. You'll have to wait a bit longer! PSSSS." Came Gai's reply.

/ Shit. / Kakashi thought to himself before finally giving out his orders. "Chiyo-basama and Sakura, can you hold off Sasori – the puppet master? Sasuke and I will take care of Deidara and rescue Gaara's body. But, until Gai and his team comes back, don't over do it." With that said, he released his grip on Sasuke's arm, pulled up his forehead protector to reveal his own single Sharingan eye and the both of them rushed out of the cave to follow in pursuit of Deidara and Gaara.

Back inside the cave, there was a tense silence between the three Shinobis, that is, until Sakura suddenly commented out of the blue. "You! I recognise you!" She exclaimed.

Behind her, Chiyo gave the pink haired girl a surprised look, having known how secretive Sasori's personality had been before he deserted the Sand. Her grandson had always been one to keep to himself, never advertising his presence loudly in public, so she was highly surprised that anyone outside of Sand would have met him and still be alive today; but Sakura's next statement helped her understand.

Sakura announced calmly: "Two and a half years ago, during Orochimaru's second attempt at invading Konoha, you were there trying to capture Naruto. I remember Yami-san of the Kuunoki describing your appearance and abilities to us. You're that puppet master that went toe to toe with one of the Kuunoki Gate Guardians! (2)" Although her voice was confident, internally, Sakura was feeling very insecure about her chances against such an opponent. Inner Sakura was in full support of taking on such a challenge, while outer Sakura knew that she was way out of Sasori's league.

Unfortunately for her, she couldn't just walk away either. This man puppet standing before was one of the Akatsuki main members – one of those men who were out to hunt Naruto, a good friend if not a brother to her. She couldn't just allow this man to leave here alive. Not only that, but she had to keep him here while Kakashi and Sasuke deal with the other Akatsuki member. She was certainly not going to stand aside and watch her precious people be harmed, so she literally had no choice but to fight with her all.

Behind her, Chiyo had loosened her hair, letting the white manes fall whether they go, and gave her grandson an old but determined look. "Sakura, do not fear him, remember I am by your side." With those words, she released a string of kunai directed at Sasori, whom easily deflected them all with his wooden, scorpion like tail.

Seeing how easily their enemy deflected those weapons did not help Sakura's confidence. "Chiyo-basama. I know that Puppet masters usually fight behind their puppets using chakra strings. And I also know that the puppet themselves are usually filled with traps and poison. I heard from Yami-san that unlike other puppet masters, Sasori actually hides himself inside one of his puppets. So how are we going to get him out of it?" She asked earnestly.

Chiyo gave the girl a weary smirk. "That's where you come in, Sakura. It's true. To Defeat Sasori, we must first take out Hiruko – that puppet that you see before you. But I definitely don't have the raw power to destroy it. However, you, who have inherited Tsunade's strength, would be able to pull that off without trouble. And it will be

my responsibility to get you close enough to him to smash that puppet to pieces, without you getting injured by any of Sasori's traps. Trust in me, Sakura, I will get you there in one piece."

"Hey. I hate waiting. Are you ready to fight or not." Sasori muttered impatiently as he raised his right hand to pull off the black cloth in front of his puppet's face.

"Relax..." Chiyo chided her grandchild. "We'll be killing you shortly."

And so starts the battle. Sasori ripped the mouth cloth out of way, and opened up the three wooden segments that made up the puppet's jaw. From the opened mouth, hundreds of poisoned needles shot out with deadly accuracy towards Sakura and Chiyo, who had rushed Sasori the moment Chiyo finished her speech. Miraculously, both Sakura and Chiyo managed to weave and dodge their way pass the hail of needles without getting cut even once.

However, Sasori wasn't done. He raised his left hand, with what looked to be some sort of wooden cannon with small missiles attached to its rounded sides. A snap sounded upon Sasori's right elbow and the wooden cannon like appendage shot forth in the area between Sakura and Chiyo's running forms. While in midair, cannon split apart revealing thousands of poisoned needles now flying in all directions, a full 360 degree circumference around its base. Both Sakura and Chiyo were frantic in their movements, desperate to avoid being hit by any of the needles.

Amazingly, neither of them got hit and Sasori was starting to get angry. Due to the lessening of distance between the two, Sakura quickly rushed towards Sasori's stationary form, readying the chakra in her fist in preparation for the final impact. Sasori tried to impale Sakura using his scorpion tail but the motion was suddenly stopped when he felt foreign strings that were attached to the wooden appendage suddenly pull tight, rendering him unable to move it. The split second was all the chance that Sakura needed in order to slam her fist into the back of the puppet – Hiroku. She was surprised when she saw that her fist had met and then destroyed a giant wooden

face mask that was hidden beneath the large Akatsuki cloak. But her surprise quickly wore off as she saw a small black form escaping from the centre of the crushed mask.

The black clad form skidded a bit before standing up straight. There, the real body of Sasori stood in a calm visage. "As expected of Chiyo - my grandmother and a master puppeteer. No wonder even that girl was able to avoid my traps completely. You've been using chakra strings to control the girl's body from the very beginning, enabling her to react instinctively to avoid all my attacks. Not only that, the initial ruse with the kunai you threw at me helped you attack more chakra stings to Hiruko's tail, which was why I couldn't move it when I needed to pierce that girl's head."

"You've not lost your touch at all, Sasori." Chiyo commented with a hint of pride and sadness.

"Of course, it was after all you who taught me everything I know of puppetry, Grandma Chiyo." A petite, delicate looking hand appeared from under the long sleeve of the black gown the figure was wearing. These pale white hands reached up and pulled black cloak away, revealing a very young face, the face of a child's. Short, shaggy looking reddish hair framed a young, fragile-looking face of a boy, but the pale face held very cold eyes – eyes of a merciless killer. Dropping the black cloak that he once wore over his body, Sasori revealed another coat underneath – this time it was the infamous Akatsuki coat, covered with the threatening colours of black, red and white outlines for the clouds – all giving an ominous and dangerous impression for a boy so young.

From the sleeves of his Akatsuki coat, the young Sasori pulled out a small scroll, opening it with his small fingers, the paper revealed a large character with the word 'three' on it. "I didn't think I would need to use this puppet again, but I guess not everything goes according to plan all the time. I hope you all feel proud, this was the puppet I used against your so-called Gate Guardian who I fought to a standstill (3)." With those words, the summoning scroll suddenly burst into clouds of smoke. Once the haze cleared, the once

summoning scroll was replaced by a human size puppet with spiky black hair hanging down the puppets head and wearing a pure black cloak with spiked-looking features upon its collar. The gem like eyes upon the chiselled face of the puppet would haunt the nightmares of many Shinobi who had ever faced such a foe.

Chiyo stared on in shocked horror. "That's... it couldn't be..."

"What? What is it?" Sakura asked, slightly afraid as she watched the blood disappear from Chiyo's face.

"That is the Sandaime Kazekage..." She muttered in shocked fear.

"Sandaime Kazekage? What do you mean?" Sakura asked in confusion, having not heard of this little secret from Yami during their past conversations.

"It's been over ten years now, since the Sandaime Kazekage disappeared from the village. Sasori! You would dare go against our Kazekage, and not only kill him, but turn his body into your slave by turning it into a puppet, a Hito Kugutsu (Human Puppet)!" Chiyo cried out in shame and disappointment, having finally gotten over her shock. "My grandson... you've fallen so far! You've not only betrayed our village, but you've caused the deaths of three Kazekages!"

"Three?" Sakura stuttered, amazed that one man could have caused so much pain and chaos to the sand village alone.

"I see before me the body of the Sandaime Kazekage. And it was you and your partner who took Gaara – our Godaime Kazekage and killed him during the Bijuu extraction process. Not only that, but it was Orochimaru – guided by yourself – who killed the Yondaime Kazekage!" Chiyo yelled in anger.

/ Orochimaru?! / Sakura shuddered as she remembered the Snake Sannin and his exploits against her team members in the past, as well as the two attempts at invading and destroying Konoha. If there

was one person Sakura could claim to hate with all her being, it was Orochimaru.

"Hey, Hey. I had nothing to do with the Yondaime. It was my subordinate that guided Orochimaru, not myself. Don't put the blame of something I didn't do on me." Sasori countered with a calm visage. "Although, I admit that Orochimaru had been my original partner in Akatsuki. And we did do a lot of things together. Now, let's get going." Sasori then directed the puppet of the Sandaime to fly towards Sakura's location.

In reaction to his move, Chiyo pulled Sakura (using her chakra strings) far away from the incoming puppet. Flying in close towards Sakura's form, a sudden ripping sound could be heard as the right side of the Sandaime puppet's cloak was slashed open, revealing several deadly looking knives and blades, all coated with poison ready to stab into Sakura's vulnerable being. Chiyo reached in instinct, pulling up the scorpion tail left over from the broken Hiruko puppet and placed it in front of Sakura to protect her. With a single slash, the Sandaime puppet shattered all the pieces of the wooden tail appendage, but it gave Chiyo enough time to pull Sakura safely to her side without any further incident.

"It's not over yet!" Sasori warned as he flung the Sandaime puppet through the air directly towards Sakura and Chiyo. The deadly blades upon the puppet's side slammed into the ground, separating Chiyo from Sakura as they dodged in opposite directions during the attack.

Raising its right arm directed towards Chiyo, 2 slabs of wooden blocks on the each side of the Sandaime puppet's right arm suddenly popped open, revealing elegant calligraphic writing symboling the seals grafted into them. "GHAAA!" Sasori shouted and an instant later, hundreds upon thousands of 'wooden' arms or hand appendages burst forth from those calligraphic seal writings. The 'arms' multiplied in numbers and reached Chiyo's shocked form in no time, burying the elderly woman in a forest of wooded puppet parts.

"CHIYO-BASAMA!" Sakura yelled as she rushed from her position to try to get towards Chiyo. Knowing that she would have to cross the puppet's location to get to her destination, Sakura tightened her fist in readiness. Unperturbed, the puppet merely raised its left hand, the wrist suddenly popped up and opened to the side, revealing a small cannon hole in which it fired a small black pebble right into Sakura's path.

Not knowing what to expect, Sakura made a hasty stop. Her body just barely stopped in its momentum before the black pebble hit the floor and a blast of smoke erupted from the impact. Then the smoke turned purple, and Sakura immediately knew it was poisoned gas. / *SHIT!* / She thought to herself, as she ran blindly towards any direction, hoping she would be able to out run the gas. Eventually, she broke through the poisonous smoke cloud, only to land heavily on her shaking knees as the lower half of her body became increasingly numb. / *Damn it! I must have breathed in some of the poison. Calm down, regulate your chakra and force the poisonous gas particles out of your lungs and bloodstream!* / Sakura concentrated, trying to regulate her chakra through out her body in order to dissipate the poison out of her body in the safest way possible.

Unfortunately for Sakura, Sasori wasn't going to give her the time to any of that. Twitching a few of his fingers, he immediately the Sandaime puppet open up a few more hidden compartments inside its body and threw out dozens of kunai, all directed towards Sakura's prone form. Sakura's eyes widened at her immanent death, before they narrowed in anger again. / *I refuse to LOSE!* / Closing one hand in a fist, she slammed it into the ground, uplifting huge boulder like stones off the ground, just in time to protect her from the kunais. Now, safely hidden behind her boulders, Sakura once again concentrated on evicting her body of the poison, and mentally praying that Chiyo was okay while she was occupied with staying alive long enough to finish this battle.

On the other side, Chiyo had summoned forth two puppets to her defence, and with them, she managed to protect herself from the swarm of wooden hands.

"Ah...them." Sasori paused, and reminisced slightly at the familiar faces of the two puppets Chiyo had summoned forth.

"Yes, the first puppets you ever constructed... Your mother... and father..." Chiyo spoke sadly, her mind wandering into the past of so many years ago, but she quickly shook her head and returned to the reality at hand. By now, Sakura had managed to be rid of all the poisonous gas she had accidentally breathed into her body. Sakura stood shakily, leaning on one of the boulders as she watched in awe at the two puppets now at Chiyo's hand. She couldn't believe that these two puppets, once human, were actually Sasori's parents. And more over, she couldn't believe he would make them into puppets. / *What type of person take their own parent's corpses and make them into puppets? It's so sick and twisted!* She thought privately to herself.

"What exactly do you hope to achieve with those two? I made them, I know all their tricks. God, you're so pathetic, I'm almost ashamed, Ba-chan." Sasori snorted back, his face completely expressionless, showing nothing but contempt.

The two puppets had their palms placed against one another, and then they separated, revealing a thin-looking, but strong ninja wire between them. Together, the first puppets Sasori had ever created launched themselves at the Sandaime puppet, easily cutting and slicing through its army of wooden arm appendages. Soon, the two puppet masters resorted to use all the other tricks and weapons within their puppets to fight against one another. Sakura watched in silent awe as both masters' hands danced in the air, as their puppets slammed and struck at one another. Eventually, all three puppets came out of the assault badly harmed; most of their weapons were withered and broken. It came out as a tie.

"Hump. Looks like this is going to be paid after all... Guess I should start taking this seriously then." Sasori muttered as he did a quick hand seal, and the Sandaime puppet's mouth opened. Slowly but surely, a mass of red sand-like particles floated into the air.

"What is that?" Sakura asked Chiyo as she finally made it to the old woman's side. The side effects affecting her body now fully disappeared as all the poison had been evicted out of her lungs and bloodstream, Sakura was ready for the next round.

"Satetsu (Iron Sand)." Chiyo explained. "A jutsu developed by the Sandaime himself. Based on the jutsu used by a previous host of Ichibi no Shuukaku, the Satetsu can be formed into any shape, allowing one to create weapons that fit any situation. The Sandaime Kazekage was born with a special physical trait which allowed him to turn whatever chakra he formed into magnetic forces. As such, the iron sand is the perfect weapon for him."

"But that's just a puppet, right? Why would a lifeless puppet have chakra?" Sakura questioned again, this time feeling more and more anxious as she watched more and more of the said iron sand come out of the puppet's mouth.

"A Hitokugutsu is a puppet made from the body of a living person. It's made in such a way that it retains the chakra that the victim had while still alive." Chiyo's voice deepened into sadness. "Only Sasori is able to make Hito Kugutsu. And by doing so, he is able to take control of the jutsu that the victim used while still alive. That is also the greatest advantage of the Hito Kugutsu."

"That's not everything." Sasori said in a prideful manner. "After all, this is my favourite puppet from my collection of almost 300 puppets."

"Sakura... Get yourself out of here now. I'll take care of the rest alone." Chiyo stated gravely, knowing that it would be very difficult for her to win against Sasori now, but at the very least, she wanted Sakura to survive no matter what the cost. "This is far beyond what I

was expecting. With that in the game, you won't be able to compete at all..." She explained, trying to deter Sakura from staying.

"No way!" Stubborn as a mule, Sakura snapped back at Chiyo. "I'm going to see this fight to the end! I am Haruno Sakura, apprentice to both Tsunade of the Sannin and Dokudes Ryoko of the Kuunoki. Until the day I am pronounced the best Medic Nin in the world, I **WILL NOT DIE !**" She shouted passionately, releasing a hint of inner-Sakura while doing so. "I'm going to crush this guy under my fist if it's the last thing I DO!" She promised heatedly.

"Oi! Oi! You're too loud." Sasori taunted as he reformed the mass of iron sand into thousands of small red pellets. "Satetsu Shigure (Iron Sand Rain)!" He called out as the thousands of pellets flew through the air and pelted down at Sakura and Chiyo. When the dust cleared from the impact of such an attack, Sasori was mildly surprised at seeing both his original puppets having Chakra shields activated in order to protect both Chiyo and Sakura. "Well. So you have been tinkering with those puppets a bit. I wasn't expecting a chakra shield. It seems you've upgraded them from when I use to play with them." Sasori noted nonchalantly.

Chiyo huffed slightly in breathlessness, she twitched her fingers and tried to close the compartments on both the arms of the two puppets, but all the limbs were stuck. Taking a look at them, she identified the problem immediately. There were red sand particles stuck in all the important joints. */ As expected, the iron sand has rendered the puppet immobile. We're really stuck this time. /*

Sasori silently recalled all the iron sand to reform into giant spikes in the air. A second later, the newly formed barrage of spikes rushed towards Sakura and Chiyo, indenting to end their lives. With both the two puppets of Sasori's parents rendered immobile, Chiyo had no choice but to cover Sakura with her own body, and revealed her hidden trump card. Opening the compartments of her own arm, she erected a chakra shield from her own appendage, protecting both herself and Sakura from the barrage of spikes. Both Sasori and Sakura were shocked by this revelation.

"Your own arm... you've rigged your own body, haven't you?" Sasori asked without expecting an answer, and then he chuckled. "We puppeteers... we definitely think along the same lines." He stated, confirming Chiyo's suspicion.

"I see... so that's why you haven't aged in over 20 years." Chiyo stated tiredly as she disengaged her left arm which she had used for the chakra shield. Sighing as she gazed at her broken puppets, she could not help but feel useless. "Sakura... We will need to find a way to escape. I no longer have workable puppets on hand and hence, there's no way I can defeat him."

"Then use me!" Sakura stated firmly, surprising Chiyo with her determination. "I said that I would punch that guy's face in if it's the last thing I do, and I intend to keep that promise. If there is one thing I hate the most, it's losing."

Giving the younger girl a wary smile, Chiyo tried to persuade her to change her mind. "I can only use one arm now; I won't be able to help you dodge all of his attacks like before. Not only that, the Sandaime's power comes from magnetism! So any weapons of iron and steel are useless against him." She warned the pink haired girl.

"That's just perfect!" Sakura readied her fists. "I don't use weapons anyway. What I do have is Chakra and my fists."

"That again. How pathetic." By now, Sasori had summoned a huge red cube and red pyramid, both floating in the air ready for his command.

As Sakura and Chiyo rush towards Sasori, the giant pyramid like structure suddenly sharpened into an elongated spear, heading right towards Sakura. With Chiyo's help, Sakura managed to jump aside, avoiding being impaled by the iron spear, but as she was twirling in the air doing a handless cartwheel, she delicately placed her right hand against the cool surface of the iron sand spear for a split second. In that split second of contact, she injected her chakra into the iron sand. "Chakra Pulse!" She announced as the iron sand

suddenly paused into its momentum and slumped slightly in heaviness.

"What the hell?" Sasori's eyes widened at the affect the girl was having on his precious iron sand with a single touch. "What the fuck did you do?" He pulled back the sand particles that made up the once pyramid-turned-spear, and the sand reacted to his calling lethargically, as if his chakra was unable to bond quite as strongly with the particles as it had been just a second ago. Angrily, Sasori mentally commanded the giant cube which he had created before to slam down on the prone form of Sakura.

Once again, Chiyo came to the rescue, pulled Sakura back from the impact crater caused by the giant box-like structure crashing onto the ground. Standing up from her fall, Sakura rushed towards the reddish cube and smashed her fist against it. In one mighty punch, he pushed the giant box-like statue right back into the cavern walls, causing quite a large cave in and exposing the inner sanctum into the outside sky.

Sasori could not help but comment on Sakura's unladylike brute strength. "All that brute strength and you call yourself a girl?!" He sneered at the girl. "And what the hell did you do to my sand?"

Sakura smirked back at him even as she huffed and puffed to gather breath. "That was called a Chakra Pulse (4). I told you before I was the apprentice of not only Tsunade of the Sannin – who is famous for the one-punch-knockout. But I'm also the apprentice of Dokudes Ryoko – who, during her younger days was known as the Unarmed Assassin. Born a Dokudes, Ryoko-sama was already quite formidable when she became a teenager. But it was after that, when she developed her unarmed combat style that made her renowned. She specialised in Chakra attacks that were able to produce all sorts of affects, for both close-combat and ranged-combat. One of which is the Chakra pulse, which is just the injection of foreign chakra into an object or substance that already has chakra by way of vibrations, wavelengths or pulses. The way in which we 'inject' this foreign chakra is so ingenious; it actually weakens the 'link' between the

enemy user and their chosen weapons, in this case, you and your iron sand."

"Hump. Troublesome woman..." Sasori muttered under his breath. / *My Iron Sand won't be able to withstand too much of that chakra pulse technique. At this rate, not only will it take too long, but it might endanger me as well. It'll use a bit of chakra but there's no way around it. Guess I'll finish her with 'that' jutsu.* / Sasori thought to himself as he moved his fingers and chakra strings in preparation. The pyramid formation flattened into a triangle and it sliced into the floating form of the giant cube. As the two giant objects merged into one big structure, thousand of spikes suddenly erupted from its merged surface. The spikes – made out of iron sand – grew like the branches of a tree in all directions, including Sakura and Chiyo's locations. "Satetsu Kaihou! (Iron Sand World Order!)" Sasori called his final attack.

/ *This is bad!* / Chiyo thought as she desperately used chakra strings to pull Sakura out of danger, but it was too late. In a matter of seconds, the entire cavern caved in, revealing a dense forest of iron sand spikes and spears literally everywhere. Both Chiyo and Sakura did not come out of this assault unscathed. Chiyo's right arm – or her old arm – was currently buried under a large rock, resulting in her being unable to move. And Sakura was stuck in between the mass of spikes, multitude of scrapes and bruises littered her body, some bleeding, and others turning purple or green in colour, reacting to the poison inside the iron sand.

"Hehe, finally. I did say that 'that's not everything', didn't I? I mixed poison into the Satetsu, so basically as long as you get a single cut on your body caused by my iron sand, you're infected. I see the poison's already started to take effect." Sasori smiled as Sakura slumped forward in a dead faint, her head landing harshly against the hard earth below her. "Her body will become numb and immobile immediately. Left alone, you've got three days. But I have no intention of prolonging your suffering." He stated as he manoeuvred

the Sandaime puppet into flying towards Sakura and Chiyo, to finish the job once and for all.

However, in the final moments just before the puppet pierced into Sakura's unmoving form with a sword, Sakura suddenly sat up and punched her fist into the puppet's body, smashing it into many tiny pieces of rubble and wood. A second after the puppet's destruction, the iron sand in the air began to fall onto the ground like rain, littering the floor with soft, red particles. Sakura avoided the sand and ran towards Chiyo, helping the older woman up by removing the rock that trapped her hand. "Sakura, how did you..." Chiyo asked, amazed that the younger woman could still move.

Sakura then showed her a small capsule. "An antidote! There's just one left now and I will give it to you. When I was helping Ino make the antidote for Kankuro-san, I was able to make three. Because I knew the opponent uses poisons, I made them into injection capsules and brought them along. But the antidote only works for three minutes. In that time, no matter how much poison we get, the effects of the antidote will turn it into harmless protein. Now, I have about another three minutes where the poison has no effect. We need to defeat Sasori within this time limit." Sakura explained.

"Right. Let's do it." Chiyo stated calmly as she climbed onto her feet, once again, she was amazed by the ingenuity of the younger generation. Not only was there Ino – who already impressed her immensely, but here was another young woman who could and would go far.

Standing in front of him, Sasori had a no-nonsense look on his face. */ I see. So I was being played all this time, huh? Well, I've had it with this game. I'll acknowledge that you're a brat to be reckoned with... and hence, I will now take a chapter from the Kuunoki's books. No holding back! /* "This is the first time since that trouble I had when entering Akatsuki. It's been so long... since I've last used myself..." Sasori commented as he pulled apart his Akatsuki's robe, revealing a body of wood shaped in the form of a man.

On Sasori's back, there were 2 wing like appendages. On his chest, there was a small trap compartment as well as a small round cylinder that had veins connecting it to the rest of his flat chest. His stomach area was hollow, showing a thick rope dripping with poison residing inside of him. It was a frightening sight to witness and Sakura could only give one statement to summarise it all. "He made himself into one... a Hito Kugutsu (a Human Puppet)."

Using a chakra string, Sasori pulled out a scroll from his back, and then he opened the hidden compartment on his chest. Opening the sealing scroll, Sasori released all his collection of puppets. In less than a second, he had close to 300 Hito Kugutsu puppets floating in the air, each one connected by a chakra string that links directly into his body through the opened compartment hole. Sasori smirked proudly down at Sakura and Chiyo. "Aka Higi Kyakki no souen (Secret Red Techniques: Hundred Manipulation)!" He announced. "With my full collection of puppets, I am able to take over a nation. So, let's see how you cope against my power now?"

Seeing the massive numbers against them, Chiyo had no choice but to act herself. Using a chakra string, she pulled back her old arm appendage that had once been stuck with iron sand, but was now free of them. Reattaching her arm, she pulled out a small scroll. "I'd forbidden the use of this jutsu. I thought I would never use it again, but it looks like that won't be the case." Flipping the scroll open, Chiyo performed a small set of hand seals and summoned forth her own special collection of puppets. Unlike Sasori's hundreds, Chiyo called forth just 10 puppets, each one wearing a white coat but with different facial features, and possibly different attach techniques as well. "Shiro Higi: Jikki Chikamatsu no Shuu (Secret White Technique, Group of the Ten Collection of the Chikamatsu)!"

"Alright! Let's go, Chiyo-basama. Remember, I've still got 3 minutes and counting. Let's do this fast and furious." Sakura punched her fists together in preparation for the final confrontation.

Without further ado, the army of black clad Hito Kugutsu flew towards their adversaries, and a massive fight was on hand. Chiyo

effectively dispersed her attention among her ten puppets, sometimes utilising two or three of them together in combined assaults, other times, using single puppets to slice and dice their way through the entourage of enemies. Sakura too, smashed her fish in and out of puppets left and right, other times she created chakra blades or spears to pierce and break apart puppets. But it all seemed never ending, the moment they take one puppet down, two or three more takes its place.

/ This is taking too long! / Chiyo understood that they simply could not compete with the numbers of puppets on Sasori's side. As such, the only way they can survive is if they take on Sasori himself. "Sakura! Aim for Sasori. I'll hold back the other puppets!" Chiyo called out to her partner.

"Got it!" Sakura answered as she punched yet another puppet in the face, shattering it into little pieces.

"Use this!" Chiyo cried as she manoeuvred one of her puppets to intercept Sakura and gave her a small white globe. "Get in close and throw it at him!"

"Right!" Sakura answered as she caught the globe in her right hand. Ducking behind a sword wielding puppet, Sakura carefully placed the globe beneath her armpits, and then she quickly performed a set of seals. "Gen Bunshin (Illusionary Bunshin)! (5)" A large burst of smoke created from Sakura's jutsu eventually cleared away revealing 10 Sakura's in her place. The ten Sakura clones rushed at the attacking puppets, heading towards Sasori's location.

The puppets tried to dispel the illusionary clones by piercing them or striking them with various weapons, but the clones simply faded out for a bit before solidifying once again, and somehow managed to land their own punches and kicks at puppets, hindering the mechanical dolls even more.

On the opposite side, Sasori was a little bit confused as to the purpose of the jutsu. Normal Bunshins were simply illusions that

immediately dispel upon contact. Other clone techniques like the Kage Bunshin or Misu Bunshin uses Shadows or Water as its base element – and these clones usually dispel when they are hit directly with one solid attack. These Bunshins utilised by Sakura fade in and out between the two phases – sometimes they were just illusions that do not dispel but simply pass through the attacks; other times they become solid and are able to do some damage themselves, even though their punches and kicks were no where near the level of power of the original Sakura.

/ So, if all ten of these clones – as far as I can see – are simply that, Clones! Then where is the original? / Sasori thought to himself as he scanned the battlefield. / I can't sense her anywhere? Is she using an invisibility technique to cloud my senses? But how? I thought she was a Medic Nin? How is she able to escape... / In that instant, Sasori's world suddenly turned black and silence shrouded his world.

A form slowly faded into existence behind Sasori's frozen form. "Mukaku no Jutsu (Blind Senses Technique) (6). Even though you're body is a puppet, there is there still something human inside, something that produces your chakra. And as long as there is still something human and alive inside your body, I can attack it with my chakra. It's over, Sasori of the Red Sand." With those words said, Sakura slapped the white globe object that Chiyo had given to her previously onto Sasori's back. Sasori immediately fell onto his feet and then the floor as if he himself was a puppet with all of his strings cut. Whatever that globe had been, it started sucking up all of Sasori's chakra before sealing the chakra away, and at the same time, it grew in size, covering and laying on top of Sasori's immobile body like a giant parasite. With Sasori's chakra cut off indefinitely, all of the Hito Kugutsu puppets that had once been attached to Sasori via chakra strings fell onto the ground haphazardly and completely defeated.

Chiyo slowly but surely trotted her way across the mass of puppet bodies and puppet parts, making her way towards Sasori's fallen body and Sakura. "You cannot move... It's over... Sasori... That

sealing jutsu completely suppresses all chakra... you can't even use a chakra tread anymore..." Chiyo then coughed out blood as her body shook from the poison invading it through a small cut on her arm.

"Chiyo-basama! Quickly. Take the antidote." With her arms already numb from the poison, Chiyo had to wait until Sakura ran towards her side and hurriedly stab the antidote capsule into her body.

"I see. So it was you who came up with the antidote to my beautiful poison. And here I thought no one would be able to figure it out." Sasori calmly stated from his place on the ground. "Hm. To think I was taken down by an old hag, and a little girl who's a Shinobi wannabe. How disgraceful..."

Chiyo signed tiredly as she looked on at her beloved grandson. "Why... Why, Sasori? Why did you do it?" She pleaded softly, her heart unable to take the torment anymore. "Just tell me one thing. Why did you leave? What compelled you to betray the Sand, the Sandaime, and me? What was it you were after? And why couldn't you confide in me?" She bit down on the tears that wanted to drip pass her eyes. "I would have done anything for you? I would have gone to any length to make you happy? I even created a jutsu just for you. A Tensei Ninjutsu (Life Transfer Technique) – a technique that could have breathed life into a puppet, at the cost of the user's own life. Just tell me WHY!? Why did it have to end this way?"

"Hump. You're rampaging emotions is why. Pathetic. When did you start getting senile and overtly emotional, grandma?" Sasori sneered in distaste. "You want to know the truth? Fine, I'll tell you the truth. I despise being human. That's all there is to it." He answered calmly.

"Wha... What? How can you hate being human? You are born one?" Sakura stuttered in surprise.

"That's exactly my point. Humans are the most detestable creatures on this planet. Only humans would create wars, kill one another, and claim it as a justifiable action. Humans can create great works of art,

preserving beauty for all eternity. But on a whim, they can destroy it all as well. I hated the fact that I was born a human, with a flesh and blood body that is weak against physical attacks. I hated the fact that my body would decay with the likes of a rotting rodent. I hated the fact that I am forced to feel useless emotions and fed stupid ideas like bonds of family, and ties to ones village. They are all concepts and lies that bind one-self to its cage, a physical cage that is known as the human body." Sasori sprouted, surprisingly passionate in his speech.

"In this body that does not feel pain, you can hit me as many times with your fist and I will not feel hurt. In this body that do not bleed or rip as muscles do, I no longer worry about the limits I can take. In this body that cannot feel emotions, I have no ties with anyone, alive or dead. Hehe. Even if you argue that we are connected by blood ties as we were, I won't feel a thing if grandma here dies. My heart... is just like this body..." Sasori's impromptu explanation was cut off by Sakura.

"HOW CAN YOU **SAY THAT?! The life of a human being... Doesn't it mean anything to you?! Doesn't **FAMILY** mean anything to you?! Why do you think like that?" Sakura cried but was stopped from smashing Sasori's face in by a tug on her arm from Chiyo.**

"That's enough... Sakura... He was made into what he is... by the misguided customs and teachings of ours in Sunagakure." Chiyo muttered under her breath, she felt truly old and helpless at the words of Sasori.

"Why don't you try having a body like this? Maybe then, you'll understand some of what I'm saying. A body without decay... As a puppet, one's body can be rebuilt indefinitely... And isn't bounded by mortality either... I can just manufacture as many people as I want... from puppets... If I want them..." Sasori taunted. "I don't just add for the sake of numbers of course. Collections are all about quality."

Sakura grit her teeth in frustration. "What... the hell are you?"

"Well, if I had to say... I suppose... I'm a person who couldn't fully become a puppet. I'm a puppet, but... I'm an incomplete puppet with a flesh-and-blood 'core'... Neither a person... nor a puppet." For once, Sasori smiled a genuinely sad smile. "Soon, I'll stop moving altogether. But until then, let me make one last request..." Here, Sasori's smile turned sadistic. "Please die with me."

Several puppets around Sakura and Chiyo suddenly sprung to life again and headed straight towards the two women with blades out and ready to pierce them. In surprise, Sakura barely managed to dodge a deadly swipe directed at her eye before Chiyo activated her chakra shield with one arm and protected her. With the other hand, Chiyo called forth the two original puppets she had used, the puppets of her son and her daughter in law. Swords in hand, both puppets stabbed right into Sasori's core, through his back using the sword in their hand. And instantly, the attacking puppets stopped moving and slumped onto the grounds again. Sasori too, was confirmed dead.

"Ha... How did he?" Sakura stuttered with surprise.

"He placed his threads underground and somehow attached them to the puppets around us. I had thought that the seal would have suppressed all of his chakra, including the ones he embedded beneath the earth. But it looks like I was wrong. He was just bidding his time so that he could reawaken those puppets and kill us. In the end, we were careless." Chiyo answered tiredly.

"I see." A few long moments of silence later, Sakura stood up onto her feet. "Well, let's get going. We still have to rescue Gaara." Behind her, Chiyo too stood onto her own two feet. / *Goodbye. Sasori... I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry... I couldn't have been a better grandmother to you... /*

Kakashi and Sasuke were in pursuit of Deidara as they jumped from tree root to tree root across a great valley carved through by a rapid

river beneath them. "Sasuke! Do you have any long range attacks in your arsenal?" Kakashi asked as he jumped.

Beside him, Sasuke frowned in thought. "Only my Katon attacks." Landing on yet another tree root, Sasuke paused for a few second to perform a list of hand seals. "Katon: Ryuuka no Jutsu! (Fire Element: Dragon Fire Technique)" Breathing out large fire dragon from his lips, the summoned dragon flames flew through the air and quickly caught up with Deidara's flying form.

Deidara's summon ducked and weaved away from the fire dragon's clutches, before Deidara released a few more smaller, clay, bird-like creatures and had some them fly towards the dragon, while the rest fly towards Sasuke and Kakashi's location. The birds that flew towards Sasuke's fire dragon exploded right in front of it, creating a gigantic blast that neutralised both attacks. The clay birds that flew towards Kakashi and Sasuke were destroyed by Sasuke when he quickly performed Housenka no Jutsu (Fire Flower Technique).

Seeing that Deidara had used the attacks as a distraction to fly further away, escaping from most of Sasuke and Kakashi's attacks, the two Konoha ninja had no choice to but to increase their speed and run after the ex-Stone Ninja again.

"Kakashi-sensei, what are you going to do? If I use any of my Katon techniques, the bastard will just duck and weave out of the way. All my fire bending techniques have only close to mid-range effects, I can't do long range fire bending." Sasuke admitted as he scrambled his mind to think of something he can do to help the situation.

"Hmm... I do have a technique that is long range and can be used in this situation. But because our target is a moving target, I may not be able to hit him with a direct hit. And I can only do this technique once, or at most twice. It's a one-hit success or failure type thing." Kakashi stated as he thought about the technique he could do with his own Mangekyou Sharingan. It wasn't that Kakashi couldn't use it, but he was rather reluctant to use it in front of Sasuke, having known that the younger Uchiha detested the Mangekyou Sharingan with all

his being. Not that he blamed the youngster, but as a Ninja, you really had to use everything to your advantage. Luckily for Kakashi, Sasuke finally thought of something he could use.

"I think... I think I've got a technique that I can use in such a situation. And whether it hits or not, it's big enough to definitely affect the enemy. But... But I need time to prepare. Can you cover me as I get ready, Kakashi-sensei?" Sasuke asked seriously, his body tense in readiness.

Kakashi only nodded. And with that acceptance, Sasuke landed and stopped his pursuing of the enemy. He took a deep breath before widening his legs and squat down lower in order to stabilise itself. / *Focus. Breathe. Remember what Katono-sama said about this technique. You must feel at peace with yourself completely before you can attempt it. Breathe...* / Sasuke thought to himself as he flexed the fingers on his hands and formed two, identical hand-seals on each hand. The index and middle fingers were straight together, while the little and wedding finger were closed with the thumb covering them. Moving his right arm only, Sasuke focussed all the positive energy within his body to move towards the tip of his right-hand's fingers as he swung them from up to down, from right to left, twisting his waist as he goes along. Then he changed sides, moving his left hand from up to down, from left to right, he focussed all the negative energy onto the tips of that hand's fingers. Releasing his breath and breathing in deeper, Sasuke then pulled the two opposition-ally charged fingers together right in front of his chest. When the single instant the two tips touched, Sasuke immediately straightened his right hand to point forward towards where Deidara's flying form was located.

The reaction was instant. A huge surge of electricity erupted from Sasuke's finger tips and flew across the air like lightning. And though the young Uchiha's aim was not exact, the sheer power behind the lightning strike affected a large area of space, an area encompassing where Deidara had flown into. The rush of lightning struck Deidara and his summoned bird, shocking the Iwa-Ninja into

numbness and disrupting whatever chakra technique he used to control his bird, resulting in the both the Iwa-Nin and his clay creature to suddenly plummet all the way towards the ground beneath them.

Sasuke slumped onto one knee, completely out of breath and having both his arms shaking under the strain. "Ka... Kakashi... Gaara." This was all Sasuke could manager to say before he started coughing, body still shaking from the strain of the release.

Luckily for Sasuke, Kakashi understood the dilemma quite well. "You did good, Sasuke. Rest for now." Performing a few hand seals quickly, Kakashi produced three Kage Bunshins (Shadow Clones). He and two of the clones quickly rushed off towards Deidara's falling body in order to rescue the corpse of the Kazekage, leaving one behind to look after Sasuke.

With a few high speed jumps, the two Kakashi clones managed to grab on the clay bird before it smashes against the ground. Tearing into the clay construction with a kunai, the two Kakashi clones quickly but delicately picked up the Kazekage's body and took it to a safe place.

Not too far away from his clay summon, Deidara's own body crashed into the ground quite painfully, resulting in the Akatsuki member coughing up blood as he felt his lungs being crushed by internal pressure. Having his body shocked by a large amount of electricity, Deidara found it incredibly difficult to move any of his limbs as all of his nervous system is out of wack at the moment. Not to mention his Chakra system had been frying under the intense electrical shock. This was why there was nothing he could do to lessen his impact against the unforgiving ground. Gritting his teeth from the pain of rupturing his body from the inside, Deidara somehow managed to curse out loud: "Shitty Uchiha!"

Unfortunately for Deidara, his troubles weren't over yet, as he suddenly heard the sound of a thousand birds all concentrated in one area. / *Shit!* / He thought to himself as he saw Kakashi suddenly

rush towards his fallen being with a powerful lightning technique in his hands.

"Chidori!" Kakashi plunged his electrified hand right into Deidara's chest, sparking the entire area in a condensed electrical surge. However, to Kakashi's surprise, Deidara's body suddenly turned brown and decomposed on the spot. "Kawarimi (Replacement technique)" Kakashi confirmed to himself as he looked from one side of the clearing to the other, trying desperately to locate the missing Nin.

It was at that moment that Sakura and Chiyo landed behind Kakashi, and Sasuke with a Kakashi clone rushing out of the bush on the original Kakashi's right side, reuniting the members of the original rescue team.

"Kakashi-sensei. Sasuke-kun. I'm glad we caught up with you guys." Sakura stated, her eyes shining in relief, even as she supported the tired looking Chiyo by her side.

"I'm impressed that you managed to find us." Kakashi stated, finally letting down his guard somewhat.

"Its because we saw the enemy flying not long ago, and then there was that huge lightning attack. Was that you, Copy Cat?" Chiyo asked, highly impressed by the attack used.

"lie." Kakashi shook his head. "That was all Sasuke." Sakura looked surprised at her teammate, while Chiyo looked on with respect in her eyes.

Ignoring the awed look flying his way, Sasuke addressed his team leader. "Kakashi, did you get Gaara?"

Kakashi nodded and looked towards the far distance, where two of his clones had secured Gaara's body away from all the fighting.

Some fifty metres away and hiding beneath a dense bush, Deidara glared heatedly at Sakura and Chiyo. / *Unbelievable... To think that Sasori Danna could be beaten by a little girl and an old hag! So much for that 'everlasting and eternal beauty' stuff; he got himself killed in an instant! His construction with its weak point exposed to everyone, was just him being overconfident anyway. Hmm... Still, if I were to say so myself... it was a death becoming of an artist... Oh well, better get out of her before I'm caught.* / Deidara thought to himself as he shuffled softly backwards and out of the bush, only to see all four members of team Gai appear on the scene.

"Good work, Neji." Gai praised as he grinned at the last Akatsuki member.

Using sheer will and chakra to override his overtaxed nerves and muscles in his legs (due to the electrical shock of Sasuke's jutsu) Deidara managed to run, dodge and jump away from Tenten's many thrown weapons. Unfortunately, he still wasn't fast enough to dodge Lee's Konoha Senpū. Having a heavily weighted leg smash into his face was not a nice experience. Deidara was kicked far away from the members of Team Gai, exposing himself to the rest of Team Kakashi as well. Deidara spat a broken tooth out of his mouth as he glared hatefully at all the Konoha and Suna ninja against him, but then he grinned as he was only a few metres away from his prized clay summon. Running towards the clay bird, Deidara tried to use his arms but winced as the pain from Sasuke's previous attack had rendered both of them completely useless. / *No matter.* / Deidara thought to himself as he opened his own mouth and bite into the clay, before swallowing it whole down his own throat.

"Everyone! Be on your guard! He's a long range fighter that uses explosives!" Kakashi having seen Deidara head towards his clay bird quickly sounded out the warning.

"Take a look at my ultimate work of art! Art is a BANG!" Deidara screamed as his body suddenly bloated and morphed into a giant balloon like creature, ready to blow.

Neji's face turned to shock as he watched Deidara's body began to deform due to the chakra within it. */ The Chakra's all gathering in one spot at once! He couldn't be... /*

Before Neji even had the chance, Sasuke had seen the same chakra condensation with his own Sharingan eyes and yelled for everyone to run for cover. "Everyone! Get away from there now!" He screamed in alarm.

A giant explosion erupted from the epicentre of Deidara's body, expanding quickly and swallowing up all the nearby trees, grass, soil, everything. It was too fast for anyone to escape. That is, until it suddenly disappeared from the clearing altogether.

"Wha... What?" Tenten asked in confusion.

"Kakashi!" Sasuke's stunned voice brought all their attention towards Kakashi and his single, glowing Mangekyou Sharingan eye. "What did you do and how did you get that eye, Kakashi?"

It was then that Kakashi stumbled backward, closing his Sharingan eye in exhaustion.

"Kakashi-sensei!" Sakura rushed towards him to see if there was anything she could do to help her old teacher.

Kakashi sighed heavily as he looked at Sasuke. "I sent both him and his explosion to another dimension. As for how I got this eye, I'll tell you later... Sasuke... I promise." Sasuke nodded in acknowledgement. "But more importantly..." Kakashi trailed off as he looked towards Gaara's corpse with sad eyes.

In a large clearing some miles away from the destroyed Akatsuki lair, Sakura placed her hand on Gaara's chest. But she could only shake her head sadly. There was nothing she could do to help him anymore. He had been dead too long. It was a gloomy reality that everyone had to accept, Gaara's gone. They had failed.

Chiyo sighed heavily as she shuffled forward towards Gaara's corpse. Kneeling down to the late-Kazekage, she placed both her hands upon his chest. "This is a result of my sin. As such, I should be the one to take all punishments. Ironically, in a way it would also be my salvation and redemption." She muttered softly before a green glow appeared from the palms of her hands as she tried to bring Gaara back to life.

"Chiyo-basama! That jutsu will..." Sakura halted as she looked at Chiyo's pained but determined face. */ Chiyo-basama. Is this what you mean... when you said that there was still something you needed to do... You're going to bring Gaara-kun back to life... in exchange for your own? /* Sakura could feel the tears prickle upon the sides of her eyes, she knew that this would be Chiyo's last moment and she wanted to honour the elder's choice by being silently supportive.

"Stop this foolishness, Chiyo-obasama. There is no need to sacrifice your life." A voice suddenly called out from the side of the group, distracting Chiyo to the point where she abruptly cut off her jutsu. A young man, covered in long white cloak stood before them calmly. The man did not act in any way threateningly, but still, his has a very strong presence, as if demanding respect even while standing casually among the grass.

"Who are you?" Lee shouted out passionately as he prepared himself for another fight.

"No, wait. Stop!" Neji's voice stopped Lee from assaulting their guest. "He's..."

Neji's voice fades as the young man pulls down his hood, revealing the face of none other than Uzumaki Naruto.

"Naruto?!" Sakura stuttered out the name of her old teammate, one who she hadn't seen in years! The rest of the Konoha teams weren't much better, all with their eyes wide and mouths open in shock.

"Naruto? What the hell are you doing here?" Sasuke blinked in surprise. "And where the hell have you been all this time?" The black haired boy shook off the shock and asked angrily.

"Now is not the time." Naruto calmly stated, his eyes never leaving the fallen form of the Kazekage. "Chiyo-basama, the fact that you were already willing to sacrifice your life for Suna, for your Kazekage, for your past sins, that is already enough. You don't need to actually go through with it. There is still more you need to do to ensure the future of Suna is prosperous."

Chiyo narrowed her eyes. "Suna needs a leader. They need Gaara, more so than myself. If my life can be exchanged for the Kazekage's, then I die a worthy death." She stubbornly said.

"I did not say anything about letting Gaara die. In fact, that's why I'm here in the first place." Naruto stated before pulling out a small scroll from his cloak, opening it, he revealed that it was a storage scroll. Lighting tapping one of the symbols on the scroll, Naruto released the sealed object – a large, clear cylinder filled with a strange liquid, and inside that liquid is a human arm and hand.

"Na... Naruto-kun. What are you going to do with that arm? And what do you mean by that last sentence? Are you're here to save Gaara too? But he's already dead! Without Chiyo-basama's Tensei Ninjutsu (Life Transfer Technique), there's no way you can bring someone whose already dead back to life!" Sakura demanded.

"Who said Gaara is dead?" Naruto's retort confused everyone. "It's true the being lying in front of you is nothing but a corpse. But his soul, his life essence, is still there, sealed away from the body... for his own protection." Naruto answered cryptically.

Both Sasuke and Neji took a deep, thorough look at Gaara's body with their respective eyes, and both were shocked that there is still one part of Gaara that still has chakra, but hidden in such a way that it does not mix with any part of his body. "The seal is at his heart." Neji muttered. "There's a seal inside his heart that still has a minute

amount of chakra inside, but that chakra doesn't seem to be affected by the rest of the body, nor does it look it's affecting the rest of the body. How the hell did you get a seal that small in to such a dangerous place, Naruto-kun?

"Who said I did? I didn't place the seal, Neji. I'm merely the one to release it." Naruto answered as he placed the cylinder onto the ground. Looking at Sakura, he spoke again. "Sakura, when I'm done, I'll need you to attach this new arm to myself, can you do that?"

"What!? What you mean you need me to attach a new arm to your body? What the hell are you gonna be doing that would cut off a whole arm?" Sakura yelled in slight anxiety, not knowing exactly what to expect.

"You'll understand soon enough." Naruto uttered before turning his gaze to Sasuke. "Sasuke, I will need one of your swords, would you be willing to lend it to me?"

"Sasuke narrowed his eyes before nodding. "As long as you don't break it in anyway." He handed one of his broad swords to Naruto who stabbed it onto the ground to be used later.

"Naruto..." This time, it was Kakashi who asked the question. "If you didn't place the seal on Gaara; who did? And when did they do it? Was it done before or after Gaara was taken by Akatsuki? Just how long as this seal been there?" He demanded.

"The seal has been inside Gaara for almost 3 years now. The seal has been feeding off of Gaara's life energy and chakra, storing the access energy away just in case of this happening. It is similar to Tsunade's Souzou Saisei technique (Genesis Rebirth). But while Souzou Saisei is activated by the user while the user is several injured but alive, this technique must be activated by an outside source, and only when the user is already dead. Once it is put on a person's heart, it automatically starts sucking up chakra and life energy, basically shortening the person's life the longer it stays on the person. However, if this person ever dies unnaturally or naturally,

that's when this seal can come into affect. Once released, it gives back to the person whatever life energy or chakra it had absorbed during its reign. The basic concept is that you take, you store, and then you give back when it is needed." Naruto explained calmly even as he slowly removed his cloak, revealing his right arm completely bandaged from finger to shoulder.

Sasuke frowned. "Almost 3 years ago?" His eyes then widened in realisation. "Ruri-sama! Ruri-sama was the one who put that seal on Gaara, exactly a month before the Chuunin Exam Tournament. I remember now. On the day that we met up, Gaara was called off to meet Ruri-sama alone (7). And then I learnt that Gaara went missing for a week before he returned looking slightly worse for wear and a lot weaker. Ruri-sama herself wasn't seen until the day of the tournament itself, Katono-sama later told me that she was sick with a high fever for a whole month. That's got to be it." He deduced.

"If Ruri-sama, after performing this... whatever seal it is, became sick for a whole MONTH, then what the hell will it be like for you, Naruto?" Sakura demanded, suddenly feeling weak in the knees, knowing that her teammate would choose the most painful, most difficult way to accomplish anything.

"It's true, there are many drawbacks to such a technique; which is why it is ONLY ever used when you know that you will die in the future. It's complicated because when the seal is put on a person, that person actually dies for a short period of time during the process. After that, he or she will have to be brought back to life manually. And then, later on, when that person who carries the seal is killed, their bodies must remain in tact, before the seal can be released in order to revive them from the dead. Not to mention, it does a hell of a lot of harm to the seal master in both instances - when the seal is placed on the body and when it is removed from the body." Naruto agreed, but he nonetheless continued with what he planned to do. "However, this is the only way to ensure that Gaara still have the powers of Shuukaku – such as the manipulation of sand, even when the bijyu itself has been drawn out of his body."

A short silence ensued as everyone digested the information Naruto had provided them. "Now, everyone, could you please move away from Gaara's body. The technique I'm about to use is very volatile and may attack anyone within a certain distance, regardless of my command." He warned and everyone heeded his warning, moving some thirty to forty metres away from him and Gaara's body. Naruto then pulled out a small kunai before cutting Gaara's clothes slightly to expose his chest area, namely the area surrounding his heart. Naruto then put the kunai away and took a few steps back to where the container (with the human arm) as well as Sasuke's sword rested.

Sakura had a very bad feeling about this as she watched Naruto's movements. "Naruto-kun, what technique will you be using?" She asked, almost dreading the answer.

Naruto didn't reply, he simply closed his eyes in concentration before taking a deep breath to prepare himself. Biting his left thumb to draw blood, he stained some of his blood across all five fingers on his right hand – the bandaged one, before performing a short series of hand seals. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu: Tenkun no Buki – Gojyo Fuuin Wa (Summoning Technique: Weapons of the Legendary Warriors – Five Part Sealing Rings) (8)"

A small burst of clouds obscured Naruto's right hand. When the smoke clears, there appeared to be small intricate looking rings on each of Naruto's fingers. However, these insignificant looking items radiated a menacing aura, one which both fascinated and terrified the other Ninjas surrounding Naruto.

/ Shit! I knew it! Only a Tenkun no buki would cause the wielder so much pain and suffering. No wonder Ruri-sama was sick with fever for a whole month. God damn it, Naruto! Why you always rely on these god-forsaken weapons! / Sakura bit her lip in order to stop herself from crying out loud. She hated these Tenkun no Buki with a passion, and she hated the fact that her old-teammate constantly uses them, regardless of the harm he does to his own body in return for such power. Shutting her eyes to stop the tears from coming out,

Sakura forcefully calmed herself. / *There's nothing I can do to stop him. I can't stop him. All I can do is support him, and help heal him once he's done with those awful things. Naruto needs my support, not my condemnation.* / She thought to herself and refocussed her attention upon Naruto and Gaara.

Standing beside her, Sasuke had a different viewpoint to the whole situation. / *The 'fallen' weapons – or sometimes referred simply as the 'evil weapons'. Katono-sama had always respected those things... and at the same time feared and detested them. They are powerful, no argument with that; but at what price. The price to use them is too high... simply too high to pay. Naruto... to be able to use them again and again, how much are you willing to pay. How far are you willing to go? For each time you use it, not only does it cause your body harm, it strips away your humanity, making you one of them... a demon. And with you being a Jinchuriki, it would be so easy to become one of them... Aren't you afraid at all? Afraid that one day, you will no longer be considered... a human? But a monster... / (9)*

Closing all of his fingers but leaving the thumb straight, Naruto rotated his wrist until he formed a 'good' sign on its side, it was then he spoke: "Inochi no wa, Hatsudo! (Ring of Life, Activate!)" The strange curved-dagger like appearance of the ring's emblem suddenly shot away from Naruto's thumb, still attached to him through a small metallic chain (10). The tiny dagger like attachment flew through the air in a straight line and stabbed right into the chest of Gaara, right over his heart.

What Sakura and the others could not see was how the dagger like stud slipped pass Gaara's rib cage and pierced right into the very important organ that is known as Gaara's heart. There, a pulse of chakra was released from the foreign object into the deceased organ, causing a wavelength of power vibrating through Gaara's immobile nerves, restoring life into the once-dead cells.

From behind Naruto, he could hear Sakura gasp in horror and surprise, but he could not spare any attention away from what he was currently doing. Already, he could feel the ring draining life

energy away from his own body. He knew he had to hurry or else he runs the risk of dying himself, even before he could revive Gaara. Bending his thumb (still with the metallic chain attached to the ring), Naruto closed his other fingers over it, and straightened his index finger this time. "Tamashii no wa, Hatsudo! (Ring of Soul, Activate!)"

Yet again, the attached stub on the index ring – this time in the form of a decorated cross, suddenly snapped away from Naruto's finger and sprang towards Gaara's corpse. With yet another metallic string chaining both the ring and its spearing target together. Just like the first ring, this second ring also managed to weave pass the rib cage and pierced into Gaara's heart. A second silent pulse was released, and an almost ethereal glow slowly began forming around the heart. There, Gaara's soul lies asleep, protected from Shinigami's touch and awaiting revival patiently.

Naruto had to physically bite his lip in order to not cry out at the spark of pain that ran down his own right arm. Already, he could feel the cells in his body heat up. */ Got to hurry! /* He thought desperately. He then bent his index finger, closed the others around it, and pointed his middle finger. "Karada no wa, Hatsudo! (Ring of Body, Activate!)"

Like its predecessors before it, the third object, this time shaped like a two sided cone stabbed into Gaara's heart with a vengeance. But unlike the other two ring's affects, this one's influence was clearly visible. Large, ugly vines suddenly sprung forth upon Gaara's skin, originating from his chest, it spread rapidly across his upper body, down his arms, across his back, down his legs, before finally slowing down once the veins appeared around his neck and jaw (11). These veins were similar in likeness to Byakugan's eye line veins when the Hyuuga activate them. However, what makes this situation so unbelievable was that these bulging veins covered almost every inch of Gaara's supposedly dead body, all except his head.

Beneath the skin's surface, a series of chakra surges swam through all of Gaara's veins, arteries and chakra circulatory system. Each surge coincided with a beat of the heart, now active after almost 5

hours in a death-like state. Each surge of chakra brought forth life in many of Gaara's muscles, bones, and organs. Glans and nerves that had once been dormant were now active and ready to be used once again; a true revival of the body in all its completeness.

By this point, Naruto was breathing heavily. His right arm was shaking slightly and he had to hold it straight with his other hand. Taking a deep breath, Naruto closed his eyes in concentration, before he straightened his ring or forth finger in preparation for the next step. "Kioku no wa, Hatsudo! (Ring of Memory, Activate!)."

The diamond shaped stud stabbed into Gaara's heart just like all the other rings. But with its activation, all the visible vein that bulged across Gaara's skin slowly but surely subsides. It left behind only faint marks or scars showing that the event had once happened in the first place. Gaara's face too, started twitching with the new signals coming into the once inactive brain. Electrical pulses, nerve signals and live cells finally connected with the master brain function, enabling Gaara to twitch a nose, and move his eyes behind his eyelids. All these little movements brought forth hope and awe among the gazing participants, but at the price of its activator.

Naruto forcefully ignored the sight of his right arm slowly turning blue, then dark purple in colour. The skin around his ringed fingers were slowly peeling off, revealing dried up or dying muscle being exposed painfully to the son. / *Just one more. Just one more.* / Naruto chanted in his head as he pointed his little finger towards Gaara body. "Kokoro no wa, Hatsudo! (Ring of Heart, Activate!)"

The heart shaped stone struck Gaara's heart right in the centre, passing through his rib cage as if it were not there in the first place. This last ring, the Heart ring, didn't exert energy in pulses like all the other rings. Instead it vibrates, and helps in awakening the once hidden or buried emotions and feelings within Gaara's mind and body. With all five rings now buried into Gaara's flesh, Naruto simply had to release it all. "Gojyo Fuuin KAI! (Five Part Seal Release!)"

For a second, Gaara's body arc up and off the ground as if he had been shocked by a lightning strike, but immediately after that instant, he opened his mouth and gasped in a huge gulp of air. And hence forth, his chest moved up and down, demonstrating that he was once again breathing. His eyes opened warily, but conscious in very way. His lips twitched with the wish to speak, but he was simply too exhausted to do much else but lie there on the ground, waiting for help.

"GAARA!" Chiyo cried in awe and hope as she stumbled towards her Kazekage.

"NARUTO!" Sakura's cry was not in cheerful celebration. She watched in shocked horror, as Naruto recalled all the studs that had once buried into Gaara's body back to his rings. Once the studs were firmly attached the rings again, all five rings disappeared in a puff of smoke, revealing a dying arm right in front of their eyes. Naruto's poor hand looked as if it was rotting right in front of Sakura's eyes. She could even smell the horrid stench of decomposing flesh and to watch it on her friend's arm was a gruesome sight.

Naruto mostly ignored Sakura's cry as he quickly pulled up Sasuke's sword (which he had stabbed onto the ground at the beginning of the unsealing) and placed it between his chest and his right (and rotting) arm. Once the sharp end of the sword is in place and facing up against his armpits, he placed a kunai in his mouth in order for him to bite on it. Once he was ready, he placed his left hand on the hilt of the sword, gripped it tightly and twisted it up in a vertical arc (12). The torrent of blood burst from his now amputated shoulder area where his right arm use to be, staining the once green grass a bright red.

Sakura did not to stifle her scream. "NAAARRRUUTOO!" She quickly ran towards her old teammate to try and stem the blood flow by using Medical Chakra in order to heal the wound.

Seeing what she was about to do, Naruto stumbled away. "NO! Don't!" Turning his eyes away from the blacked appendage that was once part of him, he looked towards the cylinder with the human arm

still inside. "Use the arm in the cylinder and attach that to me in order to give me a new arm. In that way, not only do you stem the blood lost, but I also gain a new arm as a result."

Without needing further instruction, Sakura immediately ordered Sasuke and Kakashi help Naruto lie down a clean patch of ground and wrap the open wound tightly in order to clot some of the blood. She and Chiyo (whom had come over to help when Naruto first amputated himself) quickly carried the cylinder towards the bloodied form of a boy, opened it up, carefully moving the arm out of the container and placing it against Naruto's open wound.

"This will hurt." Sakura warned before green coloured healing chakra erupted from her hands as she firmly pressed down on the area where contact between Naruto and his new arm were made. Chiyo too, sat opposite Sakura and did her part.

Having dropped the kunai in his mouth somewhere prior to him stumbling away, there was nothing holding Naruto back from screaming his pain loudly for all to hear. He literally felt each individual nerve, vein, artery, muscle and skin patch fuse together with the foreign limb. As each second dragged on, the pain only climbs until it reached a climax where by Naruto drifts off into welcomed unconsciousness.

Beside him, tears freely ran down Sakura's face, even as she continued to silently heal her friend and give him back an arm he had willingly tossed aside for this mission. It wasn't until a few agonisingly slow minutes later, when the arm was fully attached to Naruto and fully wrapped in bandages, that she let herself collapse and cry in relief. Kneeling beside her and giving her silent support, Sasuke placed a firm hand on Sakura's shoulder, silently telling her he was there for her, and also that he was proud of her. His gaze however, was riveted to the sleeping form of Naruto.

/ I don't think I would be able to make such a sacrifice. To save a friend, he had willingly cut off his own arm, and become a possible disabled person. Had he not had that spare arm already prepared,

Naruto wouldn't have been able to live his life as a Ninja anymore. He would only have one arm, and be unable to perform jutsus and a whole lot of other things. I don't think I would ever be able to measure up in that extent. I... I wouldn't be willing to go that far. / It was then that Sasuke remembered something Haku had told him a long time ago, but that he had dismissed as nothing important. / When you have someone precious you want to protect, that is when you become truly strong... I think I understand now. Naruto is strong, because he's willing to go to the extreme to protect and help his friends. I hope one day, one day I would also be willing to go that far for someone... someone precious to me. / He thought silently to himself.

By that time, a large contingent of Suna Shinobis had arrived at the clearing. At first, they were rather nervous having heard Naruto's pained screams even from hundreds of metres away. But after seeing that their Kazekage was safe and sound, there were cheers of happiness all around, and a wave of respect and admiration directed towards the sleeping teen that had brought their leader back to life.

With Kankuro, Temari and now Ino looking after the weakened Gaara, Chiyo managed to pull aside a few Suna Ninjas and asked them of her selfish request. "I would like to bring Sasori's body... back to Suna..." There was no need for debate, and the Suna Nin did bring Sasori's body, as well as all of his puppets with them back to their home village.

Even in death, Sasori's work could still be useful. After all, a puppet is a puppet, now that Sasori is dead, there are others that can take over his legacy and perhaps even use his puppets as competently as he did. Kankuro certainly wanted to try. At the same time, the Konoha Ninjas had all agreed that Kakashi's team would bring Naruto back to Suna for healing, and stay with him there; while Team Gai would make their way back to Konoha to report back to Tsunade.

Overall, it was a tragedy that turned into a miracle and everyone was glad it was all over and that no one was seriously hurt, excluding the

sleeping Naruto of course.

A few hours after all the Suna and Konoha Ninjas left the clearing; a crack appeared on the ground, followed by an arm, and then another arm, and then a head. Deidara slowly but surely climbed his way out of the earth he had buried himself in when his bunshin had self-destructed.

Once out of the ground, Deidara took some time to calm himself and catch his breath. */ Jeez... I can't believe that even my self-destructing Bunshin was eaten up like that... Although, I guess it did create enough of a diversion for me to escape... /* Deidara looked around him just to check for any potential enemies. There were none.

"Hmm.. guess it's time to head back, un." He muttered to his self. Lifting his right hand - which can now be used after Sasuke's techniques numbing effect finally wore off - Deidara gazed upon his Akatsuki ring and the Kanji written inside it. */ I wonder... is it all worth it... /* He thought to himself silently, before shaking such ludicrous thoughts away and started stomping his way towards the Akatsuki's real headquarters.

"I got it! I got it, Zetsu-san!" A childish, loud voice called out the Grass Nin, who had simply been walking around the destroyed sight. A black clad figure, complete with a strange orange mask, held up the Akatsuki ring of Sasori's. "With this, I can become a member of Akatsuki too, right? There's an opening now, right?" The cheerful figure called out in enthusiasm.

"Idiot... it's not that simple..." Zetsu's human voice retorted only to be interrupted by his own demonic voice: "***We can let him join... After all, Tobi is a good boy .***"

End

(1) Eh... inspired by **Bleach** , relating to how Yoroichi (a female character) always calls/taunts another character – Byakuya as "Byakuya-boyo". Which literally translate to 'Byakuya' 'boy'.

(2) Restoration of Faith Chapter 15

(3) Restoration of Faith Chapter 15. Personally, I'd like to think that Yami was winning against Sasori, but since I cut the battle short, it ended up as a draw. So officially, it was a draw, even though Yami did have a distinctive advantage.

(4) Original technique created by me. The direct Japanese translation is Chakra Shindo, but I decided not to use it.

(5) Gen Bunshin or illusionary clones is an original jutsu, created by myself and was first introduced in Faith in Humanity . The technique described here is the second level of Gen Bunshin. Basically, instead of being a normal illusionary clone, it phases in and out of being solid, depending on how much chakra is put into it.

(6) A Genjutsu taught to Sakura by Kureinai. First appeared in Faith in Humanity chapter 13 and 16.

(7) Restoration of Faith Chapter 33

(8) First appeared in Restoration of Faith, chapter 33. For more information or to find out what it looks like, go to my website. I've got new pictures!

(9) Yet another side-effect of the overuse of Tenkun no buki. Although this side affect would probably be affecting Naruto far more than Ruri, simply because Naruto already has a large amount of 'demonic chakra' sealed inside his own body, if he overuses the Tenkun no Buki, which leaks demonic chakra whenever it's in use, then he runs the risk of mutating his bodies DNA sequence into that which no longer resembles a human's DNA. Scary thought that.

(10) Please go to my website to have a look at the new pictures of the Gojyo Fuuin Wa there.

(11) This veins covering the whole body idea came from **Neon Genesis Evangelion** , when Ayanami Rei was invaded by one of the Angels. Her body, too, suddenly had huge veins signifying the foreign parasite invading her body and slowly climbed its way up towards her head. I always found that scene a bit creepy.

(12) The which in which Naruto cut off his right arm by placing a sword at his arm pits and then twisting it up in a vertical cut was inspired by **Claymore** , where Irene (or Irena) used the same motion to cut off her own arm and offered it to Clare.

My GOD! That was a long chapter. I did not anticipate that the Sasori fight would last so long. Anyway, hope you like the latest chapter. Please review this story and tell me what you think.

Fall of the Kuunoki

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 4: Fall of the Kuunoki

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** ", / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: Violence, betrayal death and mayhem.

Chapter 4

Naruto spent the next 3 weeks resting in Suna. He spent the first week suffering the affects of a strong fever before the fever finally broke half way through the second week, and the final week was used to rest and regain his strength back. Kakashi too, took the time to rest due to the effects of overusing his Sharingan eye. Sasuke utilised this time of tranquillity to interrogate Kakashi on how he managed to acquire his single Mangekyuo Sharingan eye, of which Kakashi somehow managed to dodge by feinting sleep every time he came to visit.

During that 3 week period, Konoha had sent a second delegate team in order to support Suna – namely Team Asuma; while team Gai returned to Konoha to report on the success of their mission. The

members of Team Kakashi had remained by Naruto's side within the walls of Suna, and helped Team Asuma where they could in re-establishing stability in the village of Suna. But then again, with Gaara now back at the helm, there really wasn't much for the teams to do.

Chiyo and her brother had a small ceremony in order to bury Sasori's body. Not many people attended the funeral of a criminal, but it eased Chiyo's mind that her whole family was now finally together again. She then dedicated herself to teaching the arts of puppetry to the future generation of Suna Ninjas as well as teaching Kankuro how to fix and utilise the Hito Kugutsu that was left behind by Sasori.

Ino remained almost permanently attached to Gaara's side, but the red-head didn't seem to mind. In fact, he smiled shyly towards her as he held her hand in a tightened grip whenever they walked the streets of Suna together. Temari spent most of her time either as a border guard or reacquainting herself with her boyfriend, Shikamaru; that is, if she managed to lose Kankuro during their rendezvous. Suffice to say, Kankuro still didn't think that Shikamaru deserved the affections of his sister, but since Gaara didn't seem to mind, all he could do was hinder their meetings as much as he could.

Slowly, the peaceful days came to an end, and on the day that Naruto was finally strong enough to leave, there was a large contingent of Suna ninjas seeing both Team Asuma and Team Kakashi off on their journey. Naruto still looked pale but he heartily shook Gaara's hand, strengthening the bond between them as both allies and most importantly, as friends who would always look out for one another.

Ino remained at Gaara's side while Temari informed them she would make her way back to Konoha a few months later, once she had enough of mothering her youngest brother to death. Shikamaru was a little reluctant to leave Temari but he didn't have much choice in the matter, and he didn't really want to stay and be put under the watchful eye of both Kankuro and Gaara at the same time.

The trip back to Konoha was travelled at a slow but steady pace, with Naruto alternatively being carried by Sasuke and Chouji, while Kakashi was helped in his own progress by Asuma. Eventually, they made their way towards the main gates of Konoha and were welcomed back with a Hero's welcome. But Naruto didn't seem too happy to be back. His gaze lingered towards the Northern direction and then to the North-west direction. */ It's not over yet. This is only the beginning... /* He thought sadly to himself.

In a large underground chamber, lit up by only candles, a hissing sound reverberated through the darkened room. A pale figure with long dark hair sat upon his throne with a bored expression. Behind him stood 3 body guards hidden in the shadows; while before him kneeled the figure of our infamous spy.

"Kabuto. What news do you bring?" Orochimaru sat slumped in his chair, as he looked over his nails, not bothering to even look at his loyal subordinate.

"News from Suna is that Sasori-sama had been taken out by his grandmother and a Ninja from Konoha. They buried his body in Sand some weeks ago." Kabuto stood up calmly and smirked at his master. "I never thought that Sasori-sama would be so weak, that he could be taken out by an old woman and some Konoha weaklings." While Kabuto gave this statement, Orochimaru's eyes narrowed.

"I take it Akatsuki had already made their move..." Orochimaru asked.

"Yes. It has been confirmed that the Ichibi no Shukaku is in their hands, but somehow, Gaara is not dead. Supposedly, Naruto-kun arrived just in time to save and revive Gaara from the brink of death, or so I've been told." Kabuto shrugged.

Orochimaru gave a savage smirk when he thought about the Uzumaki heir. "Any further news on the Konoha front or that of the Kuunoki?" He continued to ask.

"Nothing much." Kabuto stated nonchalantly. "From what I understand, there's been a bit of an information blackout from within Konoha. I would suspect that Tsunade is heightening her internal security, either trying to find our spy or to wipe out the Root Anbu group of Danzo's. At the same time, she's been trying to balance the power play of the Council, but I doubt that she'd be getting much headway in that area." Looking at his master's concentrated expression, Kabuto wondered: "Why the interest, Orochimaru-sama? Are you planning on invading Konoha while her attentions are split between the Akatsuki as well as Konoha's internal struggles?"

"lie." Orochimaru answered succinctly. "With Naruto back in the ball game, both the Council and Danzo will not be in power for much longer. Not to mention our spy will probably be rooted out soon enough. Nothing escapes those eyes... the eyes that can see the future..."

From behind Orochimaru, one of the four shadowed figures stepped forward. "Do not fear, Orochimaru-sama. Call on us and we would take out the Seer with ease."

"Do NOT underestimate him, Kimmimaro. You're health may have been stabilised, but you will never be at your top form like before. I do not wish to lose the only original member of the Sound Five so early in the game." Orochimaru threatened harshly.

"Hmp. Tayuya, Kidoumaru, Jiroubu, Sakon and Ukon were all weaklings. Do not compare us to them." The only female member of the four snorted in contempt. "They lost to fucking Genins! The lot of them deserve to die pathetic deaths!"

"Do not speak ill of the dead, Hito-san (1)." A giant of a man stated calmly.

"Oh, shut it, Juugo. I'm not one of your stupid bird friends that need to be coddled. Give me a target and let me at them. I'll shatter their minds and make them love being a slave." The female ninja by the name of Hito snapped back brutishly.

"Quiet! Juugo, Hito, I do not wish to hear your squabbling. Now, tell me, where the hell is Kageru?! She's suppose to be here as the last member of the Sound FOUR!" Orochimaru ordered in a loud and commanding voice, silencing both Juugo and Hito from any further comments.

Kimmimaro shrugged indifferently. "She and Suzumi left early this morning. They didn't report where they were going." He stated monotonously, even as his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Kabuto sighed, feeling annoyed that the clone seemed to spend so much time with his sister (2). "What is wrong with that girl? Ever since she came back from the Kuunoki, both she and Suzumi have been hanging out a lot together. It's just not natural to want to spend all that free time together in the same room..." His voice drifts off, only to be interrupted by Hito once again.

"Maybe they're into each other. Maybe they've been fucking each other with wild kinky sex all these years, you never know?" Hito taunted the white haired medic nin, only to be pushed aside with a punch to her shoulder by Kimmimaro, who glared furiously at her. Kabuto didn't take the insult lightly either, and he too glared heatedly at the short black haired woman.

Glaring at the irritated Kaguya survivor, Hito refocused her efforts at annoying him. "Tch. Feeling jealous that the snake bitch never even gave you a glance, Little bone?" Hito sneered at Kimmimaro, having always known about the bone user's secret crush on the clone of his master, and not afraid to tease him about it whenever possible.

It was really a strange triangle between Kimmimaro – who had a crush on Kageru, who spent most of her time with Suzumi, who (rumours have it) has a crush on that idiot Suigetsu. And then there's Karin who wanted to get into the pants of Kimmimaro and hates Kageru's guts. If it wasn't so stupid and complex, she would laugh at the hilarity of it all. Unfortunately, Hito didn't have much time to reminisce about her fellow Shinobi's twisted love lives, as a hard slap to the back of her head forced her onto the floor followed by a

foot to her back. She twisted her head only to glare at a pissed off Juugo, who was fiercely defending his best friend's integrity.

The curse seals upon Juugo's body started reacting and he widened his lips into an insane grin before Orochimaru slapped his face. In that instant, the killing intent disappeared from Juugo's mindset.

"I said ENOUGH of this petty squabbling. Let Kageru and Suzumi do what they want, they are of no concern to me. Now, Kabuto!" Orochimaru looked towards his must trusted advisor and henchmen.

"Hai, Orochimaru-sama." Kabuto answered immediately.

"Prepare our soldiers' combat readiness and heighten our defence. I have a bad feeling about the future. At the same time, I want the Sound four (with or without Kageru) to pack up our immediate supplies, we'll be moving base in 3 days." The ever paranoid Snake Sannin stormed off and out of the chamber.

Whenever Orochimaru feels even the slightest hint of a threat on his life, he would prepare to move his being away from harm. Such was the natural instinct of self preservation within Orochimaru's bones. / *Something is going to happen soon. Something big! And I'll be damned if I'm getting caught up in it. Be it Akatsuki, Konoha or the Kuunoki, I will NOT PERISH!* / He thought determinately to himself.

"Ne, why are we visiting the Southern base? Don't you have a meeting with Orochimaru, Niisan and the other Sound Four members?" Suzumi asked her travelling companion as she trudged through the foliage of a dense forest.

"Ah. I do not intend on going to the meeting." Kageru answered in a monotonous voice, void of any emotion.

Beside her, Suzumi signed. "You really don't get along with Hito, do you? Is that why you're not doing anything to keep your cover? We are after all, not exactly loyal to Orochimaru anymore..."

"It's not Hito I've got a problem with." Kageru interrupted but the rest of the explanation remain in secrecy.

Suzumi sighed again, accustomed to her companion's silences. Ever since they had their spirit and emotions bound together by the seal made by Naruto, and especially after her adopted father (the doctor who created her) died, Kageru had become more and more silent and reserved with time. However, that does not mean that Kageru does not communicate at all. Kageru expresses herself more with her emotions and slight nuances of her face or small gestures on her hands.

Through the spirit link, Kageru could easily express her wariness, her anger, her happiness or contentment, or excitement, or sadness. Instead of using the spoken word to convey herself, she relied almost constantly on Suzumi to 'speak out' on her behalf. Hence why many people within the Sound village thought the two were a pair of lesbian couples. Not that Kageru mind the misinterpretation, it just helped her keep up the illusion of needing Suzumi by her side at all times.

Such dependency on another would have been frowned upon in Sound. However, Suzumi had become a proficient fighter with unique abilities through the years, and no one could ever argue that Kageru was weak. As such, the overall impression of the two was that they were two strong Kunoichis partnered together; who would dare go against them? It was due to this reason alone that Orochimaru did not try to separate the clone puppet and Kabuto's once useless sister. The dynamic relationship between the two worked well and made them a powerful combination. Why break up something that works?

"Fine. So why are we headed towards the Southern base? You know that's where Karin is right? I thought you two don't get along either?" Suzumi persisted.

"We don't get along." Kageru confirmed and then paused again in her explanation.

"Oh come on, just tell me why we're going there already!?" Suzumi huffed in impatience. Even she had a limit to her patience with her partner.

"There's just something there I want to get my hands on. Research that only Karin knows about. It was either Karin or Kabuto, and I prefer talking to Karin." Kageru answered, satisfying Suzumi somewhat.

Giving a final sigh, Suzumi gave up. "I guess that's all I'll get out of you at this moment in time huh?" Shaking her head, she refocussed on the trail before them. "It's gonna be a long journey." She muttered under her breath.

In a darkened cave somewhere, nine figures in black cloaks with red clouds decorated on them stood in a circle, meeting in physical presence for the first time in a long time.

"Tobi is a good boy, Tobi join Akatsuki" Tobi danced on his tippy toes, happy to have finally made it as one of the main members of Akatsuki.

With a stern face, the Leader of Akatsuki ignored the new member's happy trance as he brought up an important issue. "Having lost Orochimaru, we were already one man short. But with Sasori down for the count, it will start becoming difficult for us to collect the bijyus. At the rate we are going, we will need to recruit at least one other person to become an Akatsuki member."

"Do you have anyone in mind?" Zetsu's creepy voice asked.

Still expressionless, the Leader answered succinctly. "Yes, and we will leave tomorrow to recruit her."

Turning his eyes to focus on the rest of the Akatsuki members, he spoke in a strong commanding voice. "Itachi, Kisame, Deidara, Kakuzu and Hidan, will be coming with me on a journey tomorrow.

Zetsu, keep an eye out on the travels of the other Jinchuriki and tailed beasts. Konan, stay and watch over the base."

"What about Tobi?" The newest member of Akatsuki popped back into the conversation.

"Stay with Konan or do whatever, I don't care." The Leader didn't even turn towards Tobi as he spoke these words.

"Who are we recruiting exactly?" Kisame asked curiously after the selected 5 members left the cavern behind.

"The Lady Oracle herself, Uzumaki Ruri."

A long silence ensued after the Leader's announcement.

Not 3 days later, a rare sight of 8 Akatsuki members, all wearing the infamous black cloaks with red clouds, were spotted trudging through the dense forests on the Raishin Mountain range, making their way slowly towards the Kuunoki village.

"Oi oi! You sure this is the way to the Kuunoki?" Kisame hefted the bandaged Samehada over his shoulder as he trudged along behind Itachi's light steps.

"We were able to retrieve a scroll map from one of the gennin teams entering the Kuunoki Chuunin exam over 2 years ago. And it has confirmed the path to take towards the Kuunoki village." One of the Peins spoke up in a calm manner, never turning back to address Kisame directly. This person had long orange hair tied into a high pony tail, and his slim face was littered with black piercings around his jaw, across his cheeks and one large piercing atop his forehead. He wore the forehead protector with the Rain emblem on it. As a missing nin, of course the emblem also had a cross directly across it.

"Well, why the hell are we recruiting this Lady crap? I say we should sacrifice her to the God of Jashin. That would be worth more to our

cause!" Hidan snapped passionately from the back of the group. He simply could not understand why they were going out of their way to endanger themselves in order to recruit a single person.

"Indeed. Our time would have been better spent boosting up our finances by hunting a few more prize bounties, instead of this ridiculous endeavour. There is no guarantee that she would even join us! And if she was against us, what would we do then? Have you forgotten that the Jinchuriki for the Kyuubi is her nephew? I can't imagine that she would willingly betray family in the pursuit of joining our cause." Kakuzu interrupted Hidan's rant about the goodness of Jashin with his own opinions on their current situation.

"She will join." A second Pein answered succinctly. This person also had long orange hair, but unlike the first, he left his hair down. Across his once smooth face, there were also place stub piercings down across both of his facial cheeks, two on his chin and a long thin shaft across his nose diagonally. Like the first, he also wore a missing nin's forehead protector from the Rain village.

"She has a reason to join us. Only we can give her what she truly wants." The third Pein followed in the second's speech without pause as if they were mentally linked. The third leader was physically larger in size than the other two, he had short orange hair and the arrangement of black piercings on his face deferred from the other two. This man had two cones stabbing out of his cheeks, 2 small round studs down his nose and small triangle piercings beneath his bottom lip. He also wore a forehead protector from the Rain village, with a scar across it.

"Oh? And what's that, un?" Deidara stood languidly on his clay bird with was flapping now and again in order to stay above the ground, and by the side of the main group.

"Freedom." Itachi whispered quietly from directly behind the three Peins.

Upon finally reaching the main stairwell that leads towards the Hidden Air village at the end of the Bamboo path, the 8 Akatsuki members did not seem surprised that there was a welcoming party waiting for them. It seemed like the Gate Guardians of the Kuunoki had already been informed of their impromptu arrival and have prepared a special greeting just for them.

"Yare Yare. This certainly brings back memories from 3 years ago." Kisame commented nostalgically, as he looked over all 10 members of the Gate Guardians standing before him.

"And just like 3 years ago, we will stop you from reaching your goal. You will not get within a hundred yards of Ruri-sama, I can promise you that." Jubei answered in a calm visage, knowing that he was facing the best of the best from the Akatsuki.

"Hehe. Well, let's get this on the road. Jashin-sama will be content with this feast of sacrifices, I'm sure!" Hidan was just about rush forward with his trusty scythe by his side when one of the Peins – this one with long hair tied into a high pony tail – held out an arm to stop his movements. "Hey! What's the big idea? My prayers to Jashin waits for no one, you know?!"

"It is unnecessary for us to fight." The first Pein stated.

"As the Lady Oracle is already on our side." The Second Pein followed the comment.

"Hence we do not need to bother with these small fry." The third Pein finished.

In that instant, a bright purple glow could be seen from inside the Kuunoki village walls. And less then a second later, a huge intricate seal emerged on the ground, encompassing the entire village in closing it, forming a giant half dome. Smaller human size seals suddenly appeared all over the grounds, circling each and every one of the Gate Guardians.

"Ruri-sama?" Jubei stuttered quietly to himself, his eyes widened at the implications. The seals beneath their feet changed from a dark purple colour to black, and Jubei's legs suddenly felt weak. He fell to his knees and slammed his chest upon the ground. He tensed his muscles but it was for no use, he couldn't move at all. His chakra was sealed, his body was sealed. "Why?" was the last words that left Jubei's lips as he felt something foreign invade his mind, forcefully rendering him into an artificial sleep.

"Huh? What happened, un?" Deidara questioned in surprise. Having been one of the few who had fought the Gate Guardians 3 years ago, he didn't expect that they would find such an easy passage right through the Kuunoki's front door. It was simply unimaginable.

"A powerful Fuuinjutsu-Genjutsu hybrid technique." Itachi answered. "It seems that the Lady Oracle had cast a strong, area-wide Genjutsu that attacks only those people of the Kuunoki."

"Indeed. Let's not waste anymore time. Our real fight is inside." The first Pein ordered before walking forward and across the gates, ignoring the 10 bodies of the Gate Guardians hindering their path.

Itachi was just about to walk after the three leaders when he felt something grab onto his right leg. Looking down, he was surprised to note that one of the Gate Guardians was still conscious enough to grab onto his leg using sheer will alone. Silently, he admired her strength.

"I... won't.... let you... through!" With each word, her grip upon his leg tightened to the point of being painful, but Itachi's face remained impassive.

Gazing directly into her blazing blue eyes filled with desperation and a determination he had not witnessed in many years, it brought memories to his mind. Memories that he thought had left him for all eternity.

Kazeha Akiko's face slowly faded away, melding into that of another female. This young girl was far paler than the Kuunoki Kunoichi's own sun tanned skin. Akiko's fiery blue eyes were replaced by solemn but deep ebony eyes so similar to his own. Yes, he remembered her - his first and only female friend. Uchiha Yumi. She, like all other Uchihas, had died that night that he had forsaken them. Even Yumi, his so called girlfriend, had not been spared. He remembered her tear-stained face so clearly now. Her eyes, filled to the brim with betrayal and hurt of such depth, voice pleading with his deafened ears even as he stabbed through her heart with his sword. It almost brought bile up to his throat; but Itachi forced it back down, and pushed those old and painful memories away.

Blinking slowly, he refocussed his eyes on the red haired girl who had gripped his leg so tightly in a futile and desperate move to stop him. For some odd reason, his heart tightened in pain as he continued to look at her determined eyes. Truthfully, he didn't want to hurt her, he had no reason to hurt her. Making a promise to himself, he reached down slowly and placed a finger gently against Akiko's forehead.

Slowly but surely, Akiko's eyes closed due to chakra-enforced sleep. Falling into a deep comatose, her grip on Itachi's leg slackened, and the Uchiha was finally able to move away. As he walked, Itachi turned around just once to look down on the red-haired Kunoichi one more time before he turned a corner and forced the whole incident out of his mind in order to focus on the upcoming battle at hand.

Truthfully, he did not want the Lady Oracle to join their cause either. Not just because he believed her too much of a wild card, but it was also because with her addition, Akatsuki would become too powerful. And if there was something he feared more than anything else, it was the actual possibility that Akatsuki would succeed.

As they crossed the lawns, footpaths and by passed houses, they watched silently, impassively as bodies after bodies of the Kuunoki residents littered the grounds. All of the villagers seem to be asleep,

or trapped in some sort of Genjutsu. They were unharmed physically; they simply weren't conscious, and therefore, they were unable to oppose them. It was eerie to walk pass an entire village of silent, none moving people, it even gave Deidara the creeps.

"Un. This is creepy, ne?" Deidara muttered under his breath. But he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. After all, whatever the Lady Oracle did to suppress her own people gave Akatsuki a huge advantage, as they needn't waste time and effort fighting their way through the horde of villagers while making their way towards her. "Yo? If you knew that the Lady Oracle would willingly join us, why did you bring so many people along for this particular recruitment? I mean, you only sent Sasori-danna and the Uchiha to go after me, so why put in so much effort for her, if she was already willing to join?" Deidara proposed this question towards one of the three Peins.

"It isn't her ladyship's willingness to join our cause that is the problem." One of the Peins answered.

"It's the souls that guard her which we must fight." The second Pein finished right behind the first.

"Huh?" Hidan, being the newest kid on the block (right next to Toby) had no clue what the hell that meant. He was about to demand a better explanation when the group of Akatsuki members finally found their prey.

The Lady Oracle, in her pristine white gown, stood before the 8 invaders. Her pace impassive and eyes bland. She stood right in front of the town river, right next to the bridge that would lead to the Council Tower and Chamber of Prayers (3). A few metres to her left laid the slumped figure of Kaga, trapped in a Genjutsu of his own master's making.

"You have finally arrived." Ruri noted emotionlessly.

The three Peins nodded in answer.

"I only have one request." Ruri's calm voice interrupted once more. Raising her right hand, the long sleeves of her dress fell down around her elbow, showcasing that she had yet another one of the infamous Tenkun no Buki activated right at this moment in time. Her entire right hand, all the way from the tips of her finger nail to mid way down her arm towards her elbow had become grey in colour. Not only was the discolouration alarming, but the Akatsuki members could clearly see that the arm was actually aging by the second. The skin was becoming brittle and scaly, as if it had been dried in an oven for hours on end, small spots of pigment across her arm as a sign of cancerous cells now growing on her skin. But Ruri ignored the whole spectacle that her arm has become and continued on with what she wanted to say. "As long as the Genzo no Biju (Illusion Beads) (4) is activated, the Kuunoki villages will not be of any threat to you. I want your word that you will not harm unthreatening bystanders." She stated her condition.

At first Hidan was about to argue that any sacrifice, threatening or not, was valuable to Jashin, when he was pulled back by one of the Pein (the long haired one without a ponytail). That same Pein answered resolutely. "You have our word."

Deidara, Kisame and Kakuzu glanced at Pein in surprise. Everyone knew that Pein was the type of person who would kill your entire family, friends, and neighbours if you wronged him. Hell, he would kill everyone you ever cared for even if you didn't wrong him. As long as you were in his way, you die, and your village burns down with you. His ultimate goal after war was to bring pain to every single human on this entire planet. The fact alone that he had given the Lady Oracle such a blatant lie was in a way amusing, and in another way not so.

But whether or not Ruri acknowledged his lie or not, they didn't know, as she turned her full attention to the river behind her. "It will start now. Be prepared."

"sO **Y** u O hA **v E B** eT R aBeD **Us** ss SS ... **RU RIIII** !!!!! " The combined voices of the dead echoed across the entire village as the

members of Akatsuki stiffened slightly at the horrific sounds.

As suddenly as the sound rumbled forth from, surprisingly, the centre of the river; the river's water surface suddenly surged up to form a giant wall of liquid ready to slam down into the invader's faces, swallowing anything and everything in it's path. Deidara quickly rode his bird summon high into the air to avoid the gigantic eruption that was caused by the surprise tsunami against the hard earth atop the mountain range.

Kakuzu used the iron strings within his body to anchor himself to the very ground and managed to stay put against the huge force of water pushing against him. Hidan unfortunately, had not been lucky and was swept away several yards to slam against a building. Kisame, having lived his entire life on the sea, easily jumped and landed on the torrential wave and rode it all the way until it calmed.

The moment the wall of water formed, Itachi had run towards Ruri's position, grabbed her around her waist and jumped away as fast as his feet could take him. Jumping and running for all his worth, Itachi and his captive managed to find a safe haven on the roof of the Gas Tower, away from the destructive wave and the possessed water.

The three Peins had also jumped aside and avoided any damage by landing on nearby rooftops.

That could not be said for the helpless and unconscious Kuunoki residents who had all been washed away in that single moment of impact.

"FUCK!!! What the FUCK was that!" Hidan trudged forward, furious at having been drenched by the sudden wave of water and slammed into a hard surface wall the way he had. "Do you have any idea how much that fucking hurt! I almost broke my fucking neck!" He cursed fluently as his feet slapped angrily against the muddy ground, further staining the bottom of his Akatsuki cloak.

"Shut the fuck up, Hidan." Kakuzu snapped irritably, annoyed at his partner running off on the mouth yet again. But anything else he wanted to say was cut off by further commands from one of the Pein's (the one with long hair tied into a high pony tail).

"Deidara! Use your explosive clay to destroy the entire surface of the Kuunoki village. We have to reach the enemy which is deep underground, in the heart of this mountain. We need to blast our way in. Itachi, save your strength for later, when the time is right, you will use the Amaterasu to eliminate our enemy; and keep Ruri with you at all times. I do not trust her not to double cross us. Kakuzu, use wind and fire to help destroy as much of the water vapour as possible. Hidan and Kisame, assist Kakuzu!" Pein, the leader of the Akatsuki gave the orders and the members of the Akatsuki followed.

With that said, the various Akatsuki members split up to do their jobs, including the three Peins. The Pein with long hair tied to a high pony tail quickly summoned forth a large, three headed lizard. Sitting casually ontop of the giant summons head, Pein gave a one worn order: "Burn." All three heads of the summoned creature opened their jaws. Upon their tongues, a large ball of burning flame grew in size before is suddenly shot forward into the pool of water that was once a calm river. A hissing sound of water vaporising into air could be heard from the centre of the pool.

Suddenly, as if in response to the threat that the Akatsuki pose, the whole body of the water pool itself shuddered in a surprisingly organic way. "**DESTROY!!! DESTROY!!! DESTROY!!! DESTROY!!! DESTROY!!!**"

A giant hand, formed by the body of water, rose high into the air before slamming down directly in front of Kakuzu and Hidan. Other forms began to emerge from the body of water as well; forms that vaguely took the same of animals and or humans ran out and separated themselves from the main pool to attack the members of Akatsuki. Only to be cut and sliced apart by Kisame and Hidan. However, all their efforts managed to do was slow the creatures

down, as even it's been cut, the water simply gathered together again and reformed its body.

"WHAT THE FUCK! Something is weird with this river's water. There's already chakra running through it, and I can't control it with my own chakra!" Kisame exclaimed in slight panic, having never seen such a thing before in his entire life. "Trying to suck the chakra out of the thing is useless as well, I've never seen anything like this!"

"That is the true form of the 7 high Councillors." The brutish looking Pein answered. "They are the combined souls of the past leaders of the Kuunoki, all sealed into liquid form and stored in a cavern at the heart of this very mountain. Every single drop of water in this place is infused with the chakra and memories of the dead. That is how they remain in this time and place, still 'alive' in a sense, but never truly 'alive' in the first place."

"This is true immortality." The other Pein with long flowing hair continued after the first. "Formless, boundless, fearless, unpredictable and unending. They have become one single conscious entity with unlimited potential and power. And with this power, that is how the Uzumaki's have developed the Yochigan – the all knowing eye. (5)"

"The only way to defeat this un-dead foe that has no form is to vaporise every single drop of water and vapour in this place. Hence, this is why we must burn it to the ground." The last Pein, with the pony tail and was still sitting upon the giant summoned lizard, shot forth more and more fire balls at the centre of the pool.

The spirit of the dead however, was not sitting idly by waiting for destruction. Long streams of water injected straight up into the air tried to capture and encase Deidara who was dodging the grasps of deadly water as much as he could, while dropping more and more explosive clay bombs all over the existing building and ground of the Kuunoki. Kisame and Hidan were having a hell of a time causing any damage at more, more often than not, they simply acted as distractions for Kakuzu to use both his Fire and Wind phantoms to

shoot forth their combined attacks: "Wind Element: Bleeding Force! Fire Element: Suffering's Source!"

As for the Peins, the one with the pony tail continued to direct the attacks of his summon at the pool of water. The largish Pein acted as a defender for the first, absorbing any oncoming attacks directed at them, seemingly not concerned that he was being dealt a lot of damage. The third and Final Pein seemed to be doing nothing of importance; however, his eyes were firmly focussed on the Lady Oracle herself. Although he had ordered Itachi to take care of her if she showed any dissention, he wasn't about to take that chance. This third Pein's sole role was to watch over Ruri and keep her chained.

From a distance away, Ruri watched in silence as her home was being blasted and burnt to the ground right in front of her. She remained completely still and silent, not a hint of tears in her eyes, impassive as always. Behind her, Itachi too remained as still as a statue, conserving his strength as he was told. But even he could be curious at times. He could not imagine what Ruri's going through now, as she watched the very village she had led for so long be destroyed. "Do you regret?" He quietly asked. Ruri did not reply nor did she look back at him. Ultimately, this had been her choice, and she had to live with the consequences.

Fire ball after Fire ball, both from the summoned lizard and Kakuzu's combined Wind and Fire attacks from his phantoms devastate the all encompassing body of water. High above them, Deidara continued to drop massive number of bombs onto the surface, barely missing the remaining Akatsuki members as he went along. The bombs resulted in damage to large number of buildings and created giant craters about 10 metres deep into the mountain. But after only 5 minutes of intense fighting, everyone could tell that the un-dead spirits of the Councillors still have the upper hand. For every gallant of water that made up the main body of the enemy vaporised by Akatsuki's attacks, a huge mass of water erupted from various

cracks on the ground to take its place. It was an unending battle and they could see no victory.

"This is taking too fucking long!" Hidan cried out in pain; as his chest was cut open from a liquid being that had frozen one of its numerous tentacles into a deadly shard of ice. "I can't even fucking sacrifice these things to Jashin because they don't fucking bleed or feel pain!"

"For once, Hidan's right." The long haired Pein acknowledged before looking up at Deidara who was still dodging the multiple water dragons attempting to kill him. "Deidara! Stop fooling around and get right to it. We need to reach the cavern of souls now!"

"Yeah, yeah... Pushy as always, the lot of them." Deidara mumbled as he ducked under a horde of ice shards that were thrown at his face. Unzipping his bag of goodies, he pulled out his favourite number. "Let's see how they handle number 18. (6)"

Miles away from the intense fighting between Akatsuki and the renowned Councillors of the Kuunoki, Jiroubu carefully settled the last of the Kuunoki villages on the ground, with the rest of the survivors that they've found during their escape from the village. "That's the last of them from the southern side." He reported as he looked towards their new leader.

"The northern side of town as well as the Uzumaki palace has been secured. Everyone there has been moved here." Kidoumaru reported as well. In his arms rested a young child, one of the orphans that had been looked after by Ruri.

"Both the Eastern and Western sides have also been secured. The last person we got out was Kaga-san. And other than getting wet, all of them are fine. It was lucky that the Akatsuki didn't notice us when we were collecting what's left of the villagers inside the town." Ukon answered on behalf of himself and his brother Sakon, of whom had separated from his body in order to over more ground and rescue all of the citizens.

"Good. Now, get into position to set up the barrier wall to protect everyone inside. Remember Ruri-sama's words. Nothing must befall the people of the village. Even if the Kuunoki is destroyed, the citizens MUST BE SAFE! It's our job to keep them safe, and that means protecting them from the Akatsuki if they come. Let's do this!" Tayuya ordered and the other three members (Ukon and Sakon and merged back into one body) got themselves into position. Performing the same hand seals in synchronisation, the Ex-Sound Four members erected a family purple barrier in the same of a box all around the slumbering forms of the villagers that once called the Kuunoki home. On top of the protective barrier, Tayuya enclosed a layer of Genjutsu, hiding the shield from any prying eyes. / *Now, all we gotta do wait for the battle to finish. And then slip away to Konoha with the survivors. Ruri-sama. Please be safe.* / Tayuya's thoughts drifted away as she went into a meditative state to conserve her energy while still maintaining both the Genjutsu and barrier up.

"Uh. Is that what I think it is?" Kisame asked in a strangely fearful manner.

"Che. Seems like we need to get to cover. Now." Kakuzu wasted no time as he hardened his skin into stone even as he ran away from the giant but ugly looking bomb that had just been dropped by Deidara.

"SHITTTT!!!!" Hidan swore as he ran for his life. Even he, an immortal of immortals, didn't want his body to be blown to smithereens. "I'll kill that bastard when I get out of here!"

The large clay bomb smashed against the surface of what was once a river, the impact was immediate. An enormous eruption of fire blasted out of ground zero, the waves of destruction continued outward smashing buildings into rumbles, pulling trees out of their ground. The earth itself shook intensely from the impact and shortly after, the ground collapsed into itself. Giant slabs of earth surface

crumbled and dropped further into itself, as if the entire mountain was sinking.

Every single Akatsuki member made it for the air, for it was simply the safest place around now. Deidara was perfectly fine where he was currently admiring his handy work. Upon the three headed lizard summon, which had suddenly sprouted wings sat the three Peins, upon each of the claws of the summon were Kisame, Kakuzu and Hidan. Ruri had protected both herself and Itachi by summoning forth a second Tenkun No buki – the Mugenkyo Nano (Infinity Cloth) (7). The two were now safely protected within the confines of the large expand of cloth of which acted as some kind of flying carpet for them.

As the clouds of smoke and steam cleared, the full damage was revealed. One whole side of the Kuunoki village, namely the mountain (where the stairs that led to the Uzumaki palace and the Library) completely collapsed down the side of the Raijin Mountain range. No building or man made structures remain upon the surface of the Kuunoki village. Simply put, the village itself was no more. All that was left was a vast cavern filled to the brim with clear liquid that looked exactly like water. The cavern itself was several miles wide (as wide as the village was large), and looked to be hundreds of miles deep right into the heart of the mountain.

"That is your target, Itachi. Do it." One of the Pein's ordered in a commanding voice.

Stepping to the edge of the carpet cloth that he was currently standing on, Itachi looked calmly into the glistening void that was the chamber of souls filled to the brim with liquid souls of the dead.

" **D E S T R O Y!!! D E S T R O Y!!! D E S T R O Y!!!** " The combined voices of the dead reached a crescendo in their chants of destruction and betrayal.

Closing his right eye, Itachi closed his hands together in a single hand seal. Calmly, he spoke. "It is said that Amaterasu is the fire

from hell which will never disappear until it burns everything in its path (8). It's fitting that this would be the fire that guided your deceased souls into the beyond." His closed eye started to bleed. In a snap, Itachi's bleeding eye opened wide and directed into the centre of the cavern of pure water.

Abruptly, a surge of black flames morphed out of nowhere directly on top of the water's surface. The flames burned furiously and unrestrained all through out the cavern. A high pitched scream echoed from the voices of the dead. A truly eerie sound when you know that you are literally killing spirits that were already dead, souls that had lived on this earth for hundreds of years. But Itachi never paused, he never wavered. Soon, the liquid water that made up the souls of the dead slowly evaporated into nothing, even the steam was consumed by the ever encompassing Amaterasu.

Eventually, there was simply nothing left in the cavern at all. And only then, did Itachi finally stop his jutsu. The moment he did stop, Itachi nearly collapsed and fell off the flying cloth, had it not been for Ruri catching him and bringing back into the middle.

"It is done." One of the Peins stated calmly as he looked at the destruction that he had wrought on the once beautiful and lively village hidden in the Air. There was nothing left but waste land.

"**Y e s , i T h a s...**" All members of the Akatsuki stiffened at the familiar voice of the souls. However, when they looked up from the destroyed chamber all they saw was 7 very faint figures floating directly in front of them in the air (9).

"G... Gh... Ghosts?" Hidan stuttered. Having been a devout follower of Jashin, he firmly believed that once killed, a sacrifice stays dead and their souls are devoured by the great god – Jashin himself. However, to see 7 real life ghosts floating right in front of him not only leads him to question his own faith, but also his own sanity.

"Honourable Council." It was Ruri who spoke up this time, while still cradling an unconscious Itachi in her arms. The seven figures,

though faint, appeared to be all female in form; each one had a covering over their faces. Some were short, others were tall, but each of them wore an outfit that did not fit this time period. In deed, each wore the clothes of their own time period, further implicating that the souls of these seven councillors derived from hundreds of years in the past.

Slowly, the first of the seven councillors, and also obviously their leader as she floated in front of the others, pulled off her hood to reveal a young, almost girlish looking face. Her eyes were pale in the sunlight, almost as pale as Konoha's Hyuuga's. The First, as she was sometimes known, gazed unflinchingly at Ruri. "You have brought destruction upon our village. The Hidden Air is no more." Her voice... was entirely human, and lacked the creepy echo that always accompanied the voice of the dead.

Pausing slightly, the spirit continued. "Without the Kuunoki, the chains that bind you to your ability and responsibility have been cut. The Uzumaki too, are no more. Goodbye, descendant." With those last words, the spirit faded into nothingness. Behind her, the other forms of the councillors too, faded away into the air, leaving nothing behind.

"Goodbye, Ancestor. And thank you." Ruri whispered in an achingly quiet voice. Finally, she allowed the tears combined with blood to flow past her eyes. She could feel it, the symbol of unity, the symbol of her responsibility slowly fading from her forehead; and with it, her ability to read the future.

"I am..." Voice breaking slightly, Ruri continued. "Finally free."

In Konoha

Naruto slumped tiredly against the internal walls of Hokage building as he felt a surge of pain behind his tightly shut eyes.

"Naruto-kun! Are you alright?!" Having witnessed the blond boy's sudden pained visage, Hinata couldn't help but come over to assist. She gasped in shock as tears of red dripped down his face from his enclosed eyes. "Have you overused the Yochigan again, Naruto-kun?" She quickly pulled a handkerchief and moved to wipe the blood from the other boy's face. But he only moved away and gave a small whimper of pain, which only further unsettled Hinata, having not used to seeing him in pain. "Naruto-kun, does it hurt? Tsunade-sama! TSUNADE-SAMA!" Hinata uncharacteristically yelled for the Hokage to come and help.

Naruto shook his head and tried to stifle both the pain behind his eyes as well as the new silence that surrounded his mind. "I can't hear them anymore..." He finally whispered when he had calmed down.

"Can't hear who, Naruto-kun? Are you really alright?" Hinata hugged the slightly shivering boy against her even as her hand glowed with healing chakra, trying desperately to pinpoint the source of his pain and heal it.

"I can't hear the voices of the dead anymore. They're gone. They're all gone... The Kuunoki..." Naruto choked the final words out when he finally let go of the grief that came with that knowledge. "It's been destroyed..."

End

(1) You probably have all forgotten, but this new character is actually Gojou Hito, Hikon's missing sister. She is a Genjutsu specialist and a new member of the Sound Four.

(2) For those of you who have forgotten, this is just a reminder that in this story, Kabuto DOES have a younger sister and she is Suzumi. By the way, I've uploaded a new image of Suzumi, depicting her looks as a 15 year old teenager. Please go to my website to have a look.

(3) See the map on my website if you're not sure where exactly I'm talking about.

(4) To learn more about this Tenkun no Buki, go to my website.

(5) Will be explained later by Naruto.

(6) This is the same explosive he used during his battle against Gaara.

(7) To learn more about this Tenkun no Buki, go to my website.

(8) I took this quote directly from the manga. I found it fitting.

(9) You can find an image of this on my website, please go to my profiles page for the link.

Phew, finished my most important chapter of the lot, even though it is a bit short. I've been planning this one for YEARS! And you have no idea how good it feel to get this one out. So tell me what you all think by pressing that 'submit review' button on the bottom left hand side of the screen. Please review!

By the way no promises as to when I'll get the next chapter out. My life has been a bitch of a roller coaster ride lately. And No, I'm not giving any excuses. Just be warned that I am not a regular updater.

Thanks all.

Scenes

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 5: Scenes

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** ", / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Phew, I've been waiting for ages until Orochimaru dies in the Canon series. Anyway, here's the next chapter.

Warning: Nothing much this chapter, just a lot of mixed scenes to build the story up. Some characters may seem a little OOC, but you get that now and again.

Chapter 5

Akatsuki Hide out

"Why did you join us?" Itachi asked. "Why did you betray your clan, your ancestors, everyone who ever trusted you, looked up to you?" Ebony eyes gazed towards the other form sitting languidly upon the bed gazing out the window.

"Isn't that what you did, Itachi-kun?" The soft feminine voice answered.

"lie. What I did was... the only way to protect Sasuke. What you did... would only endanger the one you want to protect." Itachi retorted in a calm manner.

"Is it different? Did you not willingly become Sasuke's enemy the moment you abandoned him to Konoha? Did you not protect him from afar as a member of the Akatsuki?" The ex-Lady Oracle smiled in a whimsical manner. "It's ironic. You and I are so similar."

Itachi's eyes narrowed slightly. "Then tell me, how can you possibly protect Naruto, if you've been ordered to chase him down by Pein?"

"It will all come to pass in due time, Itachi-kun. I cannot go against Pein. But I will do everything in my power to see to Naruto's safety. Pein knows this. He will not order me to chase my own nephew down. He has other uses for me." Ruri answered confidently.

Itachi continued to frown in disagreement. "How do you know? You're no longer able to see the future."

"Some things, I don't need to see. I just know." Ruri's eyes shifted from the window towards Itachi. "I have faith in Naruto. I believe him to be strong, I believe that he would be able to handle anything Akatsuki or Pein throws his way. All I can do now is having faith in him."

Itachi turned away in silent thought. "With the Kuunoki gone, what will you do now? Follow Pein's plans? Destroy the lives of all other Jinchuriki for the sole purpose of protecting one. You truly are selfish, Lady Ruri." He stated monotonously.

Ruri flicked her eyes demurely towards Itachi before returning her gaze back out the window. "In all our hearts, we are all selfish. I would sacrifice everything to see my dreams come true. Just as you would..."

"But at what price." Itachi rebutted back once more.

Ruri smiled in a frozen manner. "That is for me to decide. After all, these are the times of the trials of faith."

Konoha Hospital

"I can no longer see the future. The Yochigan has been stripped from me." Naruto spoke out in a calm voice as he rested against the cushions behind his back, lying on a hospital bed facing the serious faces of Tsunade, Kakashi, and Jiraiya.

"What?! How did that happen?" Tsunade frowned in confusion. "Isn't the technique a part of your bloodline limit? How the hell can you lose something like that?"

Naruto sighed. "Not all blood limit techniques are guaranteed. Although you may be born with the 'potential' to activate your bloodline abilities, it really is up to you to find a way to activate and then develop it. The Sharingan is a perfect example. Not every Uchiha born will activate their Sharingan. And even if they do activate it, they must actively work on it to make it a superior Sharingan. Then, they need to undertake extra steps in order to progress or evolve their original blood limit, such is the Mangakyo Sharingan."

"It's similar to the Uzumaki bloodline. What do you all know about our bloodline?" Naruto asked his audience, trying to gauge how much he needed to explain in order to get his point through.

"You're able to use the Tenkun no Buki without going insane. You're able to use the Yochigan and see both the future and the past." Kakashi piped up with his own 2 cents.

"The Uzumaki bloodline is very effective in countering Demonic Chakra, and has been used in the sealing of demon artefacts." Jiraiya, the resident expert on seals spoke up as well.

"What Jiraiya said is true. The only unique ability about Uzumaki blood is that it is highly effective in the use of seals to control Demonic chakra. The Yochigan is something we developed in order to mimic a blood limit technique. It's actually not a technique at its heart, unlike the Sharingan and the Byakugan." Taking a deep breath, Naruto decided to inform his three viewers the horrific truth behind his clan's abilities.

"What I'm about to tell you is a clan secret, so please don't ever repeat this anywhere else. Long ago... After the great demon wars in which the humans won, and the majority of demon kind were sent to the Makai, that was when the united alliance of man split and fragmented into their various 'clans' and started fighting among one another for land, power and riches. The Uzumaki clan, having suffered devastating losses, took charge of some of their minor supporters (such as the Dokudes family and the Oniyoubu) and shut themselves out of the conflict and chaos that surrounds them. That wasn't to say that the other clans didn't try to recruit the Uzumaki and any of their allies to join them however. Obviously, the Uzumaki refused, my ancestors were tired of fighting, and felt great disappointment in their fellow man for degrading into the beasts that we have fought so hard to be rid of in the first place. There was a time of great tension between the remaining Uzumaki allied clans against the rest of the world. A few Uzumaki members were kidnapped and forced to join the other warring clans; when they refused outright, they were killed. Their bodies were then dissected in order to try and find the secret to our sealing techniques, their blood were extracted to sealing scrolls and other implements. In order to protect themselves, the Uzumaki allied families moved to the top of the Raijin Mountain Range. But my ancestors developed a way to protect their bodies from ever revealing the clan secrets to the rest of the world."

"You see, when an Uzumaki member dies, there is no body. We are not buried, ever! What my ancestors did was to dissolve our human shells into liquid form and then extract that fluid out and put it into a safe place. The 'safe place' turned out to be the heart of the Raijin

Mountain Range. Deep inside that mountain, there is a giant chamber filled to the brim with clear blue liquid. That liquid is the legacy of my ancestors, my family. They are what is left of my clan, the ENTIRE Uzumaki clan, for close to five thousand years." Naruto reached up and wiped away a single tear that ran down his cheek. "Without a body, no one would be able to extract our secrets. And people like Orochimaru would never be able to summon us from the dead either. However, what we didn't realise at first was that when we liquefied the bodies, we effectively trapped the souls and memories of the dead with it. We now have a chamber full of human souls and memories from people who lived thousands of years ago. These souls merged over time; their memories slowly became one collective mind; and the chakra that once flowed through their bodies, followed in the liquid form, amalgamating and becoming stronger. Eventually, we didn't just end up with a chamber filled with water. The 'life stream', as I like to term it, was alive. It had power; it had thoughts, memories and emotions, but no form. It wasn't a singular entity, but a mixture of hundreds. It did not have one voice, but rather a compounding echo of many voices. It became a collective 'soul mind' with the body of a 'life stream.'"

"A few hundred years ago, the chamber was visited by a previous Lady Oracle – Himu. Due to hundred of years of isolation and inter breeding, Himu was born deformed and blind. She had a small body and both of her legs were cut off around the knee. She had 2 fingers in one hand and 6 in the other. Suffice to say, she had lived a hard and lonely life. But more than that, her greatest wish was to be able to see. Somehow, she found a way. She connected her life spirit with that collective 'soul mind' that was created in the chamber. Using that collection, she developed the Yochigan, and was finally able to see. But more than that, by using the collective 'soul mind' of the dead, she was able to access the 'time stream', which enabled her to see the past, and more importantly, predict the future. And so, the Yochigan was born." Closing his eyes in sadness, Naruto finalised. "Due to her great development, when the time came and her frail body was shutting down on her, the rest of the Uzumaki clan members liquefied her body and had her merge with the rest of the

'soul mind'. However, her soul was too conscious, and so, the first High Councillor was created. The 'Soul Mind' was no longer a collective substance without direction, it was now conscious, with thoughts, aims, goals. The High Councillor became part of the ruling system in the Kuunoki. The Village in the Air isn't run by the living, but by the dead."

A long silence ensued. Kakashi was simply shocked by the revelations that Naruto had sprouted, while Tsunade looked on with enlightenment in her eyes, having finally understood the burden that her old sensei was forced to shoulder as being part of the Uzumaki clan. Jiraiya was looking at it from a completely different point of view. He now understood the mechanism behind the Yochigan; and if he was being truthful, he found the entire development amazing and far beyond the standards of techniques employed in today's society.

"So, if it is because of this connection to the 'soul mind' of the Kuunoki that allows you to activate the Yochigan and see the future, how come you say you can't do that anymore?" Tsunade asked, trying to divert the conversation back to the original topic.

Naruto signed again. "The Kuunoki has been destroyed. The various souls and voices from the 'soul mind' has been scattered, I can no longer hear them. I can't feel the power of the 'life stream' anymore. It's just... gone. Without it, there is no Yochigan."

"You mean to say... The Kuunoki..." Kakashi could not finish his sentence, the idea that the Hidden Air Village - the oldest village in the world had been destroyed, is simply overwhelming.

"Who could..." Tsunade stuttered to ask, but Jiraiya answered for her instead.

"Let me guess. Akatsuki." Jiraiya noted seriously, a dark look on his face.

Outside Konoha

A few miles outside the gates of Konoha, a large group of refugees slowly trudged their way towards their destination. Most of them looked unharmed, if only a little depressed and shocked. In the lead of the large group was Jubei, who looked just as tired as the rest of the people behind him. They did not carry anything more important than their very clothes and the weapons on their bodies. They didn't care, it still hadn't sunk in yet that their beloved home for thousands of years was destroyed, that they had lost everything. But most importantly, they were simply lost because their leader was gone. None felt the loss more acutely than Kaga, who had become a zombie of man, walking dazedly at the end of the mass troupe. Had he not be dragged away by the rest of the ex-Kuunoki guardians, he would have been happy spending the rest of his life staring at the desecrated area that was once a beautiful village. He didn't know what happened to his beloved after the Akatsuki had destroyed the village, and he simply did not have the heart to even think about her betrayal. It was a sad day that an entire village of people (small as the village was) became complete lost and disorientated without the one who had always led them in the past. There was only one thing they had ever trusted with their entire being, and that was the Uzumaki clan. Without Ruri to lead them, they turned to the next Uzumaki in line. They were heading towards Konoha, they were heading towards Naruto.

Konoha Hospital, Naruto's room

"Hokage-sama! Hokage-sama!" The door to Naruto's room was slammed open by a messenger in Chuunin garb, visibly tired from their rush. "There are a few hundred Shinobi and peasants making their way here from the northern direction! They claim to be refugees from the destroyed Kuunoki!" The man shouted in anxiety and confusion.

Tsunade's eyes widened in comprehension, having just understood the situation from Naruto's explanation. Behind her, Jiraiya gave a grimace at what this all meant.

The Kuunoki has been destroyed. The Akatsuki had won this battle.

When the refugees finally made it to the centre of the Leaf village, it was chaos. Food and other necessary supplies were gathered for them as much as possible, but even with the massive effort made by the Hokage and her Shinobis, there just weren't enough to pass among all the refugees. Temporary tents were set up all around the different training fields to provide temporary shelter for the refugees. But even then, they required at least five people to share a single tent. Other empty buildings (such as the Chuunin exam arena) were also used as temporary shelters. Food was in short supply, but at least water was plentiful. Luckily for Tsunade, there were no protests or riots from either side (refugees of the Kuunoki or the civilians of Konoha) in regard to the limited resources being distributed. The Konoha civilians had remembered that the Kuunoki had helped them during their time of need after Orochimaru's second attempt at invading them. And in response to that, were more than happy to help out as much as possible.

In the Hokage's tower, a large discussion was being held between the Hokage, various influential clans of Konoha as well as the council at large.

"We can't just let them live in tents forever. We'll need to schedule and plan permanent buildings for them to live in. That's the least we can do for them after their help." One of the civilian councillors argued in favour of helping the Kuunoki citizenry.

"Indeed. Not to mention, if we amalgamate their forces into our own, then we can boost up our own number of Shinobis as well as expand our fields of expertise." One of the Shinobi councillors agreed with the proposition.

"But we simply DON'T have the SPACE. Konoha is as urban as it's ever been, with multiple reconstructions happening over the last 15 years. First the Kyuubi, then the Chuunin exam fiasco, then the second invasion! We've planned and replanned the infrastructure of

Konoha in order to make it much more defensible in a war. At the same time, we've also maximised our use of space in the entire village to cater for such defences. We simply don't have the empty space left, unless we sacrifice either the old growth forest that was here during the Shodai Hokage's reign or we sacrifice our many training areas. All of which has been booked out for use by our Shinobi." Another person put forth a new point of view.

"The Hyuuga are willing to foster some of the refugees within our clan houses. However, with the past animosity between the Hyuuga and the Dokudes, I'm not sure whether they will be willing to accept our help." One of the Hyuuga's new councillors said in all honesty.

"If space is your only concern then what about the abandoned Uchiha compounds? Surely, we can reopen that area and move all the refugees into there. The houses are all in tact and even the furnitures are still available. It just need some clean up, some maintenance checks on the facilities and an influx of food. There's enough to cater for probably the entire refugee population as the Uchiha clan compound was big enough to cater for hundreds of people." Surprisingly, it was Sasuke, who as the sole representative of the defunct Uchiha clan, spoke up and silenced the rest of the chamber's councillors for a time.

"That's... actually a good idea." Tsunade amended before looking towards the small contingent of Kuunoki representatives, namely Naruto and Jubei. "Is that satisfactory?"

Jubei frowned a bit before reply. "Normally, I would say that we of the Kuunoki would be too proud to accept such charity, especially knowing that the Uchiha compound was your ancestral home." Here, he looked directly at the last Uchiha before closing his eyes again.

"However, considering you are betrothed to Oniyoubu Maya, a prominent member of the ex-village society, it should be no problem. However, I would suggest that you ask Maya and her family to do a spiritual cleansing of the entire compound before any of us move in. This is just to appease the spirits that may have remained there after the massacre. You may not believe in spirits or ghosts that linger

after death, but to the Oniyoubu, they are very really. And none of the Kuunoki villagers will move in until a proper cleansing is performed." Jubei explained in a tired manner. Obviously, the last few days have been taxing on the young man, more so than the rest of the guardians.

Sasuke nodded in agreement. "I'm okay with that." He acknowledged.

"Then it's settled. We'll have the Oniyoubu clan perform the cleansing tonight and preparations of the mass movement can be done starting tomorrow." Tsunade was just about to conclude the meeting before she was interrupted by Naruto.

"It's best to do the actual cleansing tomorrow night, as there will be a full moon. The moon will give the Oniyoubu more power during their cleansing. I suggest that we prepare for the cleansing ritual today and tomorrow, and have the ritual itself tomorrow night." Naruto suggested in a soft voice.

In the end it was agreed that the eventual cleansing ritual would be performed the following night, as per Naruto's instructions.

Uchiha compound, the night of the full moon

Incense was burnt, bells ring a hypnotic tune once every few seconds, and candles littered all over the Uchiha compound. For every person that died on the night of the massacre, a candle was lit in their place of resting. Together, the five members of the current Oniyoubu family chanted in unison, a song like melody echoed in the air (1):

" *Namak Shiva Yang Kura Ve*

Sachi dan nama kure taye

Isbladan Jaya shantaya

Ira lam baya te jase"

The procession of five continued from room to room, house to house. Their melodious chants guiding the hidden souls to freedom and enlightenment where they belong.

House after house, Sasuke followed in their wake, seemingly reliving that night all over again in memories, but somehow feeling much more calm and nostalgic than he would have thought. Perhaps it was the song that calmed him into a meditative state. Or perhaps due to the presence of his betrothed, who always had the uncanny ability to make him feel serene and calm. Sasuke didn't know what it was, but he was grateful to not feel any remorse or anxiety while visiting his old home for the first time in many long years.

Step after step, he could vividly remember how the various bodies of his aunts, uncles, cousins and other more distant relatives laid in crumpled shapes all among the floor or furnitures. But instead of feeling pain upon seeing their freshly bled out bodies, he felt a strange sense of relief that they were finally finding the rest and peace that they had longed for.

In all the time that Sasuke had fought and lived the life of an avenger, he never thought about finding a way to reach his deceased relatives. Always, he had believed that the only way they could attain any sort of peace were if he killed Itachi with his bare hands. But through this ritual, he could feel it. The spirits of the dead were finally letting go, they were finally finding the peace that they so deserved, they were finally given the release that he himself should have given them, but had no clue how other than taking yet another life from the Uchiha. It was a fulfilling moment, even if he had not been the one to physically bring them absolution; he was at least present to feel their contentment in the air.

Upon reaching the main house of the Uchiha clan, Sasuke's old home, the youngest member of the Uchiha clan suddenly stopped moving and stood outside the doors, as if scared of what he would

find inside. His fiancé and the rest of her family had no problems entering the domain that was Sasuke's sole inheritance, chanting the song continuously to release any souls of their burdens.

Sasuke stood outside the house for several minutes, alone. He could not bring himself back into that building. The memories of his other relative's death were painful, but dulled by the understanding that they were finally given absolution, and were able to move on to better things. However, to give up his parent's memories - to let them go was much harder for Sasuke. For so long, he had wanted his father's acknowledgement; for so long, he had his mother's support and love. To let go of their ghosts which he had clung to almost subconsciously was not an easy thing to do. But his musings were cut off when someone called out his name.

"Sasuke."

Sasuke blinked his eyes and focussed on his fiancé, who stood before him in a nervous manner. He frowned slightly in confusion. "What's wrong, this is the last house that we need to cleanse. And it's almost 3 in the morning, if we don't hurry, dawn will come." He asked her in a somewhat calm voice, hiding his inner anxiety.

Maya shifted slightly in unease. "There's 2 spirits that reside here. Their auras are much stronger than the other spirits we guided into the afterlife. The two here, they do not wish to leave yet. They have some unfinished business to do before they are willing to go." She explained in a tight voice, knowing that her words would wound her future husband no matter how nicely she worded it.

Sasuke's eyes widened in shock before he tightly shut it and grimaced in pain. The two souls that still reside here would be none other than his parents. As much as he wanted to rush in there and somehow manage to communicate with his deceased mother and father. He was so terrified that they would scold him for not having the ability to avenge them in all this time. He did not want to see their disappointment, not in life, and definitely not in death. One part of him desperately wanted to see them again, to exchange some last

words. Another side of him was simply terrified of the entire notion. As if to secure his thoughts, Maya interrupted again.

"They wish to see you, Sasuke. They have something to tell you. And as stubborn as they are, until they fulfil their business, even I cannot cast them into the afterlife." Maya paused slightly to give her future husband some room, but continued after a few minutes of silence. "I know it pains you to do this. But please, Sasuke, listen to their last words; their final wishes. As their son, it is your duty to do so. Don't run away."

Her words gave him courage. And together, hand in hand, the last Uchiha and the heir to the Oniyoubu finally entered the house together.

Upon entering the room where his parent's body was found that night all those years ago, Sasuke's grip on Maya's hand tightened inexplicably. But at a glance, he could not see anyone other than the other Oniyoubu members. With a quick flash of his bloodline limit, the Sharingan also confirmed that he could not see anything other than the five living bodies in the room other than himself. "I can't... I can't see them. How..."

"You are not able to see them in their spirit form, unlike us." The younger sister of Maya, Miyu (2) answered.

"As such, we will let the two souls inhabit our own bodies, in order to speak to you. We are mediums, Sasuke-san. As such, it is our role to act as the bridge between the living and the dead." The younger brother of Maya, Maru finished the explanation.

With that said, the two adult Oniyoubu clansmen (Maya's mother and father), stepped forward and closed their eyes in preparation for being possessed. It took a few minutes of silence before both forms suddenly slumped forward as if the strings that held them up right were snapped. A haze began to form around the room, covering the features from everyone. And although, Sasuke still gripped the hand of his betrothed, he could no longer see her, nor hear her or anything

else in the room either. Soon, the haze dissipated slightly and Sasuke was face to face with his parents, for the first time in many years.

His throat constricted as his eyes watered up at the sight he had so desperately wanted to see again, but at the same time, frantically didn't want to be reminded of. But before he would decide on how to react, they spoke.

"Sasuke." Uchiha Mikoto's skin was as white as snowflakes but her voice was as loving as ever. "You've grown so much. You've become a young man in the short time that had passed. I am so very proud of you."

"Mom!" Sasuke choked the word out of his throat as tears freely fell from his eyes.

"Son. I know I don't tell you this enough, but I need you to know that I've always loved you, and have always been proud of you. It didn't matter whether you were the best or not, or how you compared to Itachi. You are my son, and for that, I am already proud of you." Uchiha Fugaku gazed sadly at his youngest son. His eyes were strangely tired as if having held on to this secret for so long had exhausted the once strong and proud man.

"Father!" Sasuke was sobbing openly at this point, finally hearing the words that he had always wanted to hear from his deceased father.

"Sasuke. There's something else you must know. Before you go off and hunt Itachi. Before you blame the rest of the world for our deaths, there is something you must know. A secret that we have kept from you for far too long." Mikoto looked at her son with such longing and sadness, it was heartbreaking. "A secret that ultimately ended in our deaths by Itachi's hands."

Her last words broke through Sasuke's grief, and his shocked eyes gazed at his deceased parents without blinking. "Wha... What do you mean?"

Fugaku gave a tired sigh before looking pointedly at his youngest son and heir. "The Uchiha clan was about to stage a Coup etat on the eve of the Kyuubi festival, when three days before the festival, we were killed off by our own spy in the Anbu, Itachi."

Silence reigned for a time, before Sasuke found his voice once more. "What?!" He looked towards his father with such deep confusion in his eyes.

Fugaku then looked away, as if in shame. "The Uchiha clan was supposed to be the strongest, the best. But since the founding of Konoha, the Uchiha clan has always been ranked second to the Senju clan, always in the shadow of the Hokages. If we were the strongest clans, then why have there never been an Uchiha become Hokage. Why were we exempt from the Shinobi Council, just because we made up the majority of the Military police? Why were we kept away from joining the Hokage's own personal armies, the Anbu? We were segregated from society at large, forced to live in a corner of the village, though large that it was. We weren't openly scorned but fear was evident in their eyes when they looked upon us. And after the incident with Kyuubi 16 years ago, we were looked upon with more suspicion then ever before."

Pausing slightly to catch his breath, Fugaku did not let himself be interrupted before continuing on with the rest of his explanation. "I wanted to bring glory to the Uchiha clan once more. I wanted to make the clan prominent in the minds of world. I wanted to prove that we were better than the Senju clan. After the Kyuubi incident, with the death of the Fourth Hokage, and the Sandaime taking back the reigns of control – I thought it would be the perfect time to strike and take control of the village from the senile old man. I believed that had I succeeded, I would see Itachi as the new Hokage and the Uchiha clan in the lead once more." Sighing heavily, Fugaku closed his eyes. "My ambitions may have resulted in the downfall of the entire clan."

"Father? Are you saying... you were willing... to risk a civil war?" Sasuke stuttered in shock. This was sounding more and more like

the massacre that happened in the Kuunoki 80 years ago – The Kuunoki 5 Clan Genocide (3). When an uprising led by 5 powerful clans of the Hidden Air Village were abruptly slaughtered all in one night, by a single 14 year old possessed member of one of the clans – Katono, whom later became Sasuke's teacher during his apprenticeship to the older man. In order to avoid a civil war, the possessed man had single-handedly annihilated 5 clans and around 250 lives were lost that night, all because they went against the council's ruling of the village.

Fugaku kept quiet while Mikoto took her turn to continue the story. "I'm sorry, Sasuke. But at the time, that was the agreed plan among all of the Uchiha clan. From the oldest member to youngest, everyone wanted to participate in the coup in order to secure the future of the clan. We wanted a better future for yourself and Itachi. I'm sorry... that our judgement not only resulted the death of so many, the destruction of the clan, but most of all, the pain in your heart."

"Everyone!? Even the Aunty and Uncle that ran the rice cracker stands? (4) All of you were in on this? Even Itachi? If that's the case, then WHY WASN'T I TOLD?! Sasuke practically screamed, having been kept out of the loop all this time.

Mikoto had tears in her eyes but refused to cry. "You were too young, Sasuke? And at the time you've just started going to the Ninja Academy. We didn't think you had made any friends there yet, but we couldn't take the chance. Everyone else had been older than you, and they understood the discrimination that we all suffered as being born an Uchiha in a world that worshiped the Senju. All I wanted... all I wanted was the best... for you...your future." At this point, the tears ran down the Mikoto's face unopposed.

Holding Mikoto against his shoulder, Fugaku sighed heavily before returning to the story. "The plan for the coup was agreed to by every member of the clan, but to ensure that no body caught wind of this, we sent a spy into Hokage's Shinobi ranks. That spy was Itachi."

Sasuke's eyes widened again in surprise at the announcement.

"Itachi was supposed to report in to us whenever and if ever suspicious movement on the Shinobi forces have been deployed. He was especially ordered to keep an eye on the movements of Anbu (as he was a member of them at the time), and more importantly, to keep the confidence of the Sandaime, the 2 councillors Koharu and Himura, as well as Danzo." Fugaku tightened his other hand into a fist of anger. "I did not expect... No, I couldn't believe... that Itachi was actually a double agent. He acted as if he was in the interest of the clan, but in actuality, he was working for the Hokage, relaying all our plans."

Sasuke choked. "He chose the village... over the clan..." His harsh voice whispered upon understanding the situation.

Mikoto's muffled voice from Fugaku's shoulders sounded. "No one really expected Itachi to turn traitor on the clan. And as such, his extermination of us was made that much easier because we believed him to be one of us. On that night, the night that everything fell apart, he came to me, and asked me to surrender and admit to treason."

Sasuke stayed silent, and so did Fugaku.

"He told me that he was acting under the orders of the Konoha council; that the Uchiha clan will be annihilated on this night for treason against the village. He asked... no, begged... me to surrender. If I did, he may be able to negotiate for me to stay under house arrest and with you living with me. For him, the only two who deserved to survive were you... and me, Sasuke." Sasuke cried silently in response. "I declined."

Sasuke looked away, feeling abandoned.

Mikoto bit her lip as she watched the pain wash over her son's face. "Please understand Sasuke. If the rest of the clan were to be killed off, then I, as a knowing member of the plan, as a supporter of my

husband, as the lady of the main house, should NOT be spared just because I am the mother of Itachi and yourself. It wouldn't be fair to the others who had to die on that night. I would never be able to live with myself if I knew that I was living on the sacrifices of others, the guilt would have eaten me alive. I made my bed, Sasuke, and as such I would lie in it of my own volition. As much as it pains me, my son, you were truly the only innocent bystander in the entire incident. You were the only one that deserved to live, that deserved to survive."

"Our pride was our downfall. And it was also because of that pride, we would not surrender. We willingly chose death when we realised that our plan had been discovered. We fought fiercely, but we had lost the moment Itachi chose the village over us." Fugaku paused for moment. "I... do not wish for you to follow in my folly." He finally said.

"Why?" Sasuke shook his head in denial. "Why did Itachi chose the village over us, over our own family? Why was I spared if the entire clan were to be exterminated? Why am I the last? And if Itachi didn't do anything wrong, why didn't he stay? **TELL ME WHY ?**"

With tears still streaming down her face, Mikoto tried to reason with Sasuke. "During the third Ninja world war, Itachi, barely four years old witnessed countless people slaughtered in cold blood. Not long after that, he met and befriended the Kuunoki presentative, Uzumaki Yuki – whom was there for peace negotiation and later became his sensei for a short amount of time. Itachi... changed after meeting her." Smiling sadly at her son, Mikoto couldn't help but stutter the next part out, revealing her personal pain regarding the matter. "He looked to her... as m... more of a mother... than he ever did towards me..."

"I believe it was her, who taught him that peace was far more fragile than anyone ever thought. And it takes persistence and sacrifice in order to achieve it. The early years of trauma had already turned Itachi into a boy who loathed war, but it was her who made him the man he is today. Through her, he became a strong and determined man who would work tirelessly to keep the village safe and stable. I

knew his dedication to the village, his dedication to her memory was strong. But I didn't know... didn't expect... I didn't want to believe that he would choose her over me, would choose to follow in her ideologies than to protect his immediate family. Perhaps... that resentment played a part in my wanting to die an Uchiha than to live as a known-traitor." Mikoto's voice drifted into silence in shame and heartache.

Fugaku looked towards Sasuke with pained eyes. "My son, I ask you, plead you, please don't follow in my folly. For all it would bring is pain and suffering. My mistake has cost me everything. You are the last of my legacy, the only thing worthy of the Uchiha name. Make me proud my son. And once again, I am so sorry." Fugaku's voice faded slightly at the end of his speech.

"Mother? Father!" Sasuke's shouted in confusion as he saw the strange haze appearing again, slowly covering both his parent's features.

"It seems our time is up. Sasuke, know that we love you and are very proud of you. Do not follow in our footsteps. Lastly, there is something else you need to know." Mikoto called out in a whisper.

"No, please stay. Don't leave me again. Please! Mother! FATHER!" Sasuke let go of all inhibitions as he ran towards the fading forms of his parents.

"Uchiha Madara lives, Sasuke. He helped Itachi in the extermination of the clan. That is one man, who should not live. Sasuke, beware of Madara." Fugaku and Mikoto completely disappeared into the accumulating haze, their voices fading into wind.

Sasuke could reach his parents. He could not find them. He stood there, hyperventilating, knowing that he had lost his parents right in front of his eyes again. Collapsing onto his knees, he crumbled and cried. He cried as he had never cried before. For the loss of his clan, for the sins of his clan, for the actions of his parents and brother, for everything that had tainted his life and name, he cried. After a while,

he vaguely felt two arms who gently but firmly pulled him towards the chest of someone. He could smell the familiar scent of his fiancé, and it was in her arms, he reached his absolution. He now knew the truth and was finally free of the ties that bound him to the past. He cried and sobbed through out the night and into the early rays of day light.

A few days after, all of the Kuunoki refugees settled into their new home in the Uchiha compound. The compound itself had changed due to both the cleansing ritual and the new settlers themselves. The gloomy atmosphere that had once plagued the land was gone; it felt like a clean slate, ready for moulding. The air was fresh, the birds were singing, and everything felt... peaceful.

As Sasuke leaned comfortably against the trunk of a tree he sat in, he contemplated everything he had learned in the last few days. He still didn't know what he wanted to do from this point forth. Should he give up his revenge on Itachi now that he knew the reasons behind the action? But there were still so many unanswered questions. Why didn't Itachi stay? Why did the Sandaime and the other councillors chose to destroy the entire clan? Couldn't there have been some other way to deal with the situation? Why did the entire clan chose to go into civil war? Who the hell was Uchiha Madara? These questions may plague his mind, but he knew he wasn't alone. Had he only ask, Maya would be more than willing to help him, and so would his friends in Konoha.

There was one thing that he had decided on. He would not follow in the path set by Itachi's last words; nor would he follow in the footsteps of his father that lead to the destruction of the clan. / *I follow my own path (5). I decide what I would do and I will do it. I am me, Uchiha Sasuke, and my destiny is my own. I*

In a hidden cavern located somewhere in the elemental countries, the members of Akatsuki assembled once more. There were 10 figures all together and among them, the leader stood tall as he

proclaimed their next tasks. "Preparations are complete, it is time to act. Hidan, Kakuzu, go after the nibi. Deidara, Tobi, the Sanbi. Itachi, Kisame, for now concentrate on the Yonbi. Konan and I will go for the Gobi. Ruri, I have a special task for you. As you have recently become the newest member of the Akatsuki and has yet to prove your worth. Not only that, but we are lacking one of the rings. It is your responsibility to hunt down Orochimaru, destroy his base of power and return with his ring. After that task is done, only then will I decide on whether to allow you to hunt the Rokubi. Your partner will be Zetsu. Remember, you are still in the probation period and as such, prove your worth. That is all."

One by one, the shadowy figures of the Akatsuki shimmered away until only two stayed behind.

"Why did you recruit her? You know very well she would betray us at the slightest chance?" A demanding voice asked the leader, Pein.

"She is useful to our plans." Pein answered simply.

"That does not explain why you deviated from the plan! Do not forget your place, boy! You work for me, you answer to me, you follow **MY** orders. I ask again, why did you recruit her ? She is a threat to us, are you asking to be backstabbed? I've worked too long and too hard to get to this point only to be impeded by such nuisances." The other voice snapped irritably. His rant was cut short however by the so-called leader of the Akatsuki.

"Madara. I know what I'm doing. I will tell you once more. She is useful to our plans. You do not need to worry about her betraying us; I already have her on a short lease. There is nothing to fret about." Pein replied confidently.

"Hmp. If anything happens to our plans because of this change, I will have your head, god or no god." Madara's sinister voice threatened before he too vanished into thin air.

"Your arrogance becomes you, old man." Pein commented snippily into the empty cavern before he himself vanished, leaving the cavern as empty as it one was.

Upon leaving the cave opening which they used to project their image into the secret chamber for Akatsuki meetings, Ruri breathed in a deep breath of fresh air. Sighing slightly, she turned her head towards a nearby tree. "So, I believe you have some idea as to where we can track Orochimaru, don't you? Considering you are the spy master of the Akatsuki." She commented lightly.

Soon, a face and body emerged out of the tree. Zetsu glanced towards Ruri with a bland expression on his face. "Of course." One voice snorted. " **WE ARE THE BEST AT WHAT WE DO.** "

Ruri gave the strange plant-man a cheeky smile. "Mind if you lead the way?"

"Heh. I would have thought the Lady Oracle wouldn't need guidance of such a simple matter. **INDEED, HOW DISSAPPOINTING.** "

Said lady gave a light shrug of nonchalance. "I've lost the ability to read the future. From this point on, I will need to depend on your information, just as any other member of the Akatuski. With Sasori gone, you're the obvious choice." Still keeping the smile on her face, Ruri continued in a cheery manner. "What do you say? You lead me to Orochimaru, and then I do most of the work. You get to watch the entire battle without lifting a single finger. Do we have a deal, partner?"

"Tch. Do not underestimate me. **INDEED, WE ARE AFTER ALL ONE OF THE LONGEST SERVING MEMBERS OF AKATSUKI.** Follow us." Zetsu muttered before slowly reemerging into the grass floor towards the western direction.

Ruri smiled charmingly even as she bit into her thumb and spread a bit of her blood over the rest of her fingers. Performing a short set of

seals, she called forth her chakra. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! Tenkun no Buki! Mugenkyo no nano!" A large beige cloth immediately puffed into existence to surround its master, wrapping her firmly but comfortably within its clutches. The head of the intelligent cloth pointed towards the western direction and without any further warning, it flew through the air, carefully carrying its precious master within itself.

Some time later, Zetsu re-emerged from the ground and stepped towards the ledge of a large hill overlooking a cave in the mountain side. Standing outside the cave were no less than 10 shinobis, each bearing the Sound forehead protector. Behind him, he could sense the presence of Ruri and her floating carpet land softly on the ground.

"He should be there. **With over 500 shinobis to guard him.** Now, our deal is complete. **The rest is up to you.** " The bipolar Akatzuki member slowly shuffled away to re-merge with his beloved earth.

"Hump. At least I didn't have to go through the trouble of finding the snake hiding in his many holes." Ruri muttered to herself before she suddenly dodged to the right, barely avoiding ten small white bullet objects that flew pass her ear. Swiftly turning around, Ruri smirked at the three shinobi standing before her, each proudly wearing the Sound forehead protector.

There was Kimimaro of the Kaguya clan, both hands extended ready to shoot off more bone bullets if needed. Behind him, stood Hito of the Gojou clan holding a large cleaver like sword – the missing sister of Gojou Hikon and a former Snow Village Ninja. Standing threateningly on the right side of Kimimaro was the infamous Jugo. The original carrier of the Curse seal and one of the first test subjects of Orochimaru's.

"Well, nice to see I'm so important that you sent a welcome party for me." The smirk never left Ruri's face even as Kimimaro's eyes narrowed in anger.

Flicking his wrists this way and that, he flung many more finger bone bullets at the ex-Kuunoki Ninja. Instead of dodging this time, Ruri simply had her summoned cloth surround her in a protective barrier, deflecting all of Kimimaro's bullets. "You'll have to do better than that, little boy." Ruri taunted in a confident manner.

"You're **be ing MEAN !!!**" Jugo gave a roar of anger as he lost control of his inner beast once more, transforming into a horrid creature of horns, hideous scale-like skin and a giant axe for an arm.

Instead of staying completely on the defensive, one part of the summoned cloth attacked Jugo by extending itself even longer and wrapping the fearsome monster's arm firmly before flinging the man back with a twist of its body. Jugo shrugged off the impact after having smashed his way through a boulder and several trees, before charging himself towards his enemy once more.

Ruri ignored the assaults of both Jugo and Kimimaro, confident that her Tenkun no Buki would be able to stand up to whatever the two flung in its way. She glanced up to see several white snowflakes falling down towards her. / *Genjutsu*. / She thought to herself even as she performed a basic Kawarimi to get out of the Genjutsu's range. Her summoned cloth simply flew towards her new location and rewrapped itself around its master in a protective manner.

Seeing that the other Sound Shinobis had noticed their ruckus and were well on their way to surround her lonesome self, Ruri decided to up the anti a little. Lowering herself to her knees, she placed her still slightly bleeding hand on the ground. "Chi, Ishi, Itami, Hone. (Blood, Stone, Pain, Bone.) (6) My name is Uzumaki Ruri, and by my blood, my pain, my bone, for as long as the stones keep my oath, I summon thee. Come forth! Tenkun no Buki - Iwa no Hone! (Weapon of the Heavenly Warriors, Bones of Stone!) (7)

Immediately after finishing her call, Ruri leapt off the ground and with the use of her other Tenkun no buki – the Mugenkyo no Nano, she drifted high into the sky.

At first, Kimimaro, Jugo and Hito were all confused as nothing happened after her summon. But a few seconds later, they could feel the ground shaking as if a volcano was about to erupt.

"Scatter!" Kimimaro had a second to shout and leapt away himself before the earth suddenly erupted. A giant skeletal hand-like appendage ripped its way out of the ground and started dragging the rest of its huge body out. All of the Sound Ninjas were shocked to speechlessness as the humongous creature revealed its head in the shape of a bird like skull, and more bone like structures attached to his shoulders forming skeletal wings. Suffice to say, it looked like a full skeleton of a giant dinosaur with a bird like head and wings on its back (8). Unlike the skeletons in museums, this one was alive and moving. Its hollow eye holes glowed with a supernatural light. Opening its jaws, the creature gave off a howl of freedom even though it exists without a voice box.

Refocusing its attention on the ant like shinobis standing near its feet, the creature gave a strange grin like expression, especially considering it didn't have beaks or lips to convey its pleasure at having targets to crush.

"I'll leave these to you, Iwa no Hone!" Ruri ordered as she left her pet to its own devises. Turning, she slowly flew towards the entrance to Orochimaru's underground base.

Drifting on to the ground, Ruri gingerly placed her feet on stable earth and pulled her Mugenkyo no nano around her, shrinking the large piece of cloth into a more manageable size of a long scarf. She kept her eye directly at the entrance towards Orochimaru's current hideout, as well as the young man standing firmly in her way.

Yakushi Kabuto glared icily at the ex-ruler of the Kuunoki village. Neither spoke a word before Kabuto suddenly rushed forward in a surprisingly reckless move. Both his arms glowed with Chakra as he summoned forth the use of Chakra scalpels. Ruri simply dodged back and ducked under the medic nin's swipe of his arms before jumping a little further away.

"You are not my prey today, little Dokudes. Why don't you step out of the way? You might live a little longer." Ruri taunted the younger man, knowing exactly what words to say to enrage him.

"Shut your trap, you Kuunoki whore! You will die today! I swear it on my old blood!" Kabuto yelled uncharacteristically, the whites in his eyes bled into a reddish hue, releasing the full power of his bloodline ability.

Ruri simply sighed before she pulled one end of her weapon scarf towards Kabuto. The Tenkun no buki immediately lengthened upon her command and quickly wrapped itself around Kabuto's chest, arms and soon enough legs. Kabuto tried desperately to cut through the seemingly invincible cloth but to no avail. The cloth simply absorbed all the chakra that he tried to use to cut it with. And trying to use the real scalpel to cut the cloth only resulted in the scalpel being bent due to the strength of the cloth itself. When Kabuto tried to yell at Ruri, his entire head was wrapped up in the enlarged piece of cloth, entrapping him completely.

Once her prisoner was secured to her satisfaction, Ruri simply turned around and walked confidently into the Snake's den. She stepped lightly into a dark and dingy corridor once she passed the entrance. The corridor was lined with patterned walls and candles which provided the only light source in the whole assemble. Strolling through the corridor with a purpose, Ruri dragged the bandaged form of Kabuto behind her on the floor. She moved with seeming knowledge of the layout and didn't stop until she ended up outside the last doorway in the entire hall.

Kicking the door open, Ruri immediately ducked under a barrage of swords being thrown her way. The swords were all copies of Orochimaru's own Kusanagi but eventually dispelled to form snakes once they landed on the ground. Ruri shot the snake summons with shuriken before she threw the prone form of Kabuto towards the snake sannin standing in the middle of a large chamber. Orochimaru jumped aside as Kabuto's body was suddenly released from the hold of the Tenkun no buki, flew through the air at high speed and

smashed against the chamber's far wall with a loud crunch. Falling off the wall and landing on the hardened ground with a groan, Kabuto found himself weak and unable to move due to having most of his body's chakra sucked out of him by the Tenkun no buki. He couldn't help but feel incredibly resentful when the one chance he had of fighting against the ex-Kuunoki leader with his master by his side, and he was incapacitated. / *God DAMN IT!* / He swore continuously in his mind, as his body refused to move, regardless of how much he willed it to.

"Heh. Had it been Kaga or some of your lowly followers – the Gate Guardians, I would have been more worried. But you? Without your powers of seeing the future, I'm not afraid of you." Orochimaru stated self-assuredly.

He bent down low from his waste, enlarging his mouth to enormous sizes, he then released a horde of snakes from his opened jaws, all scrambling towards their enemy. Ruri didn't even bat an eyelash at his blatant taunting or the swarm of snakes coming her way. Tightening her grip of the Tenkun no buki, she jumped off the ground and landed on top of her trusty cloth. Then, the cloth like weapon suddenly lengthened itself and circled around its master in a protective shell before glowing bright white colour. The white cloth then gave a loud electrical screech before erupting out hundreds of bolts of lightning all along the ground and up the walls of the Chamber. The multitudes of snake didn't have any chance to blink before they were all destroyed by the sudden surge of electricity, shocking them into dispersing.

Even Orochimaru was unprotected for this giant lightshow as he was too late to Kawaremi out of the way, not to mention there was nothing to kawaremi with, considering the entire ground, walls and even ceiling had electricity rupturing through its surface.

Finally, after several seconds, the light show died down, leaving Orochimaru's shaking body to fall face first onto the undisturbed earth. Far behind him, Kabuto was unconscious.

Slowly lowering herself onto the ground once more, Ruri stepped lightly and cautiously towards the downed snake. As she strolled closer towards her prey, she couldn't help but reverse Orochimaru's previous challenge. "In deed, reputation wise, Kaga, Jubei and the others all are famous for their fighting capabilities, while I myself, am an unknown. But that just makes me even more dangerous, don't you think? I am, after all, the one who commands their respect at one time. One would think that the master... should always be... more powerful... and more dangerous... then the servant." She stopped directly before the downed Sannin. Releasing the cloth held in her left hand, Ruri raised her limb and called forth a technique without hand seals: "Tenshi no Doki (Angel's Wrath)" The chakra surrounded her hand in the form of a large drill like saw, ready and waiting to slice through anything.

But before Ruri could plunge her deadly chakra enhanced hand into Orochimaru, the snake sannin opened his month and something large and white swiftly escaped his body. Turning around, Ruri never showed any of her inner shock as she gazed upon the true Snake Sannin. "I see. So your true body is nothing but a giant, white serpent... Can you even call yourself human anymore?" She commented quietly as she stared at the giant white creature with an ugly head, covered by spiky black hair.

Orochimaru didn't hesitate a moment before he plunged his large opened mouth towards Ruri. The ex-Kuunoki Shinobi jumped out of the way, only to find herself facing two long white snakes that originated from part of Orochimaru's body, hiding as scales. Swinging her Tenshi no doki, she slashed at the snakes, cutting and drilling them into pieces before using her Tenkun no buki to lift her away from the swift creature that Orochimaru has become.

Turning around, Orochimaru released more of his scale snakes towards Ruri in a large rush to surround and bite her. Ruri wrapped her Tenkun no buki completely around her body, repelling any attack of Orochimaru's as even his snake could not penetrate the invincible defence of the Mugenkyo no Nano. Once more releasing a sudden

but huge surge of electricity, Orochimaru found himself retreating as almost half of his body's snakes were vaporised by the high density electrical charge. Using that moment's hesitation, Ruri used Shunshin to instantly teleport herself out of her protective barrier to a location behind Orochimaru's head. Just as Orochimaru was about to attack Ruri once more, he found his head being drilled through by Ruri's Tenshi no Doki.

Blood splattered against all four walls and ceiling as the giant snake head was literally punctured through from skull all the way through to the jaw. Nothing was left of the skull other than pieces of bone, muscle, tissue and hair. With the snake head fully destroyed, the rest of the body fell to the floor in a resounding thump.

Waving her hands in the air, Ruri grimaced at the smell of rotting from the corpse of Orochimaru – it was already moulting. Not only that, she also finally noticed the venom in the air, and concluded that it was probably another one of Orochimaru's tricks. "Too bad, I'm also half Dokudes and therefore immune to poison." She commented softly to herself before turning away from the late Sannin's body and walked away from the entrance. Behind her, Kabuto – who had finally awoken in the last few seconds of the fight, could only lay silently still as he watched his beloved master fade from this world, and by the hands of the witch who also ordered his own mother's death.

Once outside the chamber, Ruri diligently opened every door to every room she came upon, hoping that one of them will reveal the placement of the Akatsuki ring she was after. Several patient minutes passed before she finally found her target. Sitting among a multitude of jars with bodies of various snakes in them, is the rotting hand of Orochimaru's original body, still with the ring attached to its little finger. Smiling at her success, Ruri practically skipped towards her prize in a cheerful manner. Pulling the little ring off the revolting hand, she cleaned it slightly with her Akatsuki cloak before placing it onto her own little finger. The Akatsuki ring shrunk in size immediately and moulded itself to her finger exactly. Ruri

appreciated the look of the ring on her finger for a little longer before deciding it's high time to leave the snake's den.

It didn't take long for Ruri to escape out of the underground entrance, and when she did, she gazed around with cold eyes at the destruction her summon had caused to the environment. Trees were uprooted, the entire area was filled with multiple giant craters, some areas were scored, and others were completely overturned. However, what caught her most attention were the bodies that littered all over the place, or in some cases, body parts. Stepping gingerly over someone's left over arm and torso, she glared accusingly at her giant summon who was busy crushing several Oto Nins in his skeletal hands as if it was playing puppets with them.

"That's enough, Iwa no Hone! Return to the abyss, I command you." Ruri ordered. Pausing in its torture ministrations, the blank glowing eyes of the giant winged dinosaur looked towards Ruri, before dropping its human toys unceremoniously onto the ground. Turning fully towards its master, the giant bone creature started dissipating into thousands of particles, dispersing into the wind. Soon, there was nothing left of the once-large creature that caused such havoc.

"Well, looks like I'm finished with my mission now." Ruri shrugged, not giving her surroundings another glance, she hopped onto her floating carpet before speedily flew off towards the distance; probably back to the Akatsuki hideout.

Hundreds of metres behind her, hiding behind some overturned trees, the meek figure of Gojou Hito gave off a huge sigh of relief. "Looks like we escaped from the Dragon's mouth. That was too close for comfort." She stated to herself seeing that the enemy had finally left them alone. Turning around to look at her fellow surviving Sound Nins – an unconscious Jugo and an armless Kimimaro, she couldn't help but shudder in fright at the thought of how close she had come to certain death. "Well, I'll bet you that Orochimaru-sama is dead. Or else she wouldn't have been able to leave the hideout like that. Guess we're on our own huh?" She nudged her foot against

Jugo, but the large man stayed unconscious, simply too exhausted to move.

"Oi! I'm talking to you! What the hell should we do now!?" Glaring at the unmoving form of Kimimaro (who was still gripping his missing left arm), Hito shouted in frustrated panic. But Kimimaro looked to be in a state of shock, all he kept on murmuring softly was "Orochimaru-sama can't be dead. Orochimaru-sama can't be dead. Orochimaru-sama can't be dead."

"Shit!" Hito swore to herself, wincing at the pain on the side of her ribs, no doubt some of them were broken as well as her wrist. She gave out a heavy sigh. "What will happen to us now..."

Far in the southern end of the elemental continent, two female figures finally reached their destination. "Phew, I thought we'd never get here." The shorter of the two women, with spiky white hair pulled into a high ponytail spoke out in exasperation. "Ne Kageru, do you think Karin will even want to see us?" She asked her companion.

"Even if she didn't, she would have no choice in the matter." Kageru answered, because she paused and shut her eyes as if in pain.

"What's wrong? What was the sharp spike I felt with you?" Suzumi asked in concern as she too, had felt the strange sensation through her link with Kageru.

The female clone reopened her eyes slowly with a look of shock on her face before she quickly covered it again in a calm visage. "Orochimaru is dead."

"WHAT! How the hell did that happen? Orochimaru! The same Orochimaru Snake Sannin? Who could..." Suzumi's rapid questions were abruptly cut off.

"I don't know who killed him. All I know is that the connection is gone. I can't feel his presence in my mind or the curse seal anymore."

Kageru smirked at this. "This will make my mission a lot easier with him out of the question."

Giving her companion a raised eyebrow, Suzumi asked curiously. "What exactly are we after?"

Kageru shifted her eyes towards Suzumi for a second before returning to look at the hidden compound in front of her. "I suppose, with Orochimaru dead, I can tell you. I have a mission of upmost importance, and that is to find out how to extract the curse seals from the bodies of Orochimaru's experiments. I want to rid them of his corruption, and allow them to live their lives free of the seal."

Suzumi's eyes widened at comprehension. "Can... Is that even possible? I heard that not even Tsunade, the greatest medic in the world was able to extract the seal?"

"That's because Orochimaru's curse seal is a mix of Ninjutsu, Fuiinjutsu and Hyoninjutsu (healing arts). The only way to extract the entirety of the curse seal out of a victim is to attack all three aspects of the seal. I can handle the Ninjutsu part of it, as I am a clone of Orochimaru himself. I will have Karin, who has worked on the curse seal before and who knows more about it than most people to handle the medical side, and lastly, I have this scroll to handle the Fuiinjutsu side of things." Kageru concluded as she held up a small finger sized scroll for Suzumi to see.

Suzumi looked at the tiny scroll in suspicion. "And pray tell, how did you get your hands on a so called miracle scroll that would cure people of the curse seal?"

Kageru continued to smirk. "From Uzumaki Naruto himself."

Suzumi gapped at her companion, but Kageru had moved on from where she originally stood talking to Suzumi. She was walking towards her life's goal. */ I will undo everything that he has done. I will prove myself to be his absolute counter. If he is the dark side of what man is capable of, then I will showcase myself as his complete*

opposite. / Kageru thought firmly to herself as she strode forward confidently towards the hideout where Karin was currently residing in.

End

(1) Believe it or not, this is an actual prayer song in Hindi (I believe). I kinda copied it but am not sure that I got the spelling of it right; nor am I truly certain about the translation of it either. Please just ignore any significance in regard to what it means in Hindi, as I only chose it because I had it in my head at the time of writing this, and I had nothing else to choose from.

(2) A picture of all 5 members of the Oniyoubu Clan can be found on my website, I will do up profiles for them at a later date. Please go to my profiles page if you wish to find the link.

(3) Referenced from Restoration of Faith , chapter 33.

(4) Um. I don't remember their names, but they did appear in the anime and the manga (chapters 225 page 8).

(5) "To break that chain of influence, you must find your own way... your own path." Referenced from a quote that can be found in Restoration of Faith , chapter 33, when Katono-sama (Sasuke's sensei in the Kuunoki) advised what Sasuke must do in the future.

(6) The oath was copied from a Gundam Wing Fanfiction – The Source of All Things by Maldoror (Chapter 30 – Truth). The full oath is "Chi, Ishi, Itami, Hone. Blood, Stone, Pain, Bone. My name is Duo Maxwell, Shi No Kami. As long as the earth keeps my blood, I will never tell a lie. Chi, Ishi, Itami, Hone..." I love that story. Too bad it's not complete and probably never will be. /sigh/

(7) Iwa no Hone – this name is also copied from the Gundam Wing Fanfiction – The Source of All Things by Maldoror. It's actually a

place or home of one of the characters.

(8) I copied this image from an Art book I bought. Please see my profiles page for links.

I hope you guys don't think I made Sasuke too melodramatic. As I'm not going to let Sasuke join in Madara's crazed scheme like in the cannon series. I needed to find a way to fit that whole back story into this plot somehow. What better way than to get the story from a different point of view. By the way, I also hope I captured the personalities of Mikoto and Fugaku alright.

I always viewed Mikoto as a loving mother and a dedicated wife, but more than that, she strikes me as a person with pride and noble intentions. She loved her family, and would do anything to ensure their future happiness, even if it meant betraying the village, she would stand by her decision. But when found out to be a traitor, she would accept her punishments with her head held high. She would not find ways to escape her plight, especially if it meant unfairly surviving while everyone around her died. I think I got her right, hopefully.

Fugaku was much harder to portray, mostly because I can't identify with him myself. He has a hell of a lot of pride in himself, his sons, and the clan. As a leader, he has a responsibility to the clan. As a father, he wants the best for both Itachi and Sasuke. He acted out his plans because he does not want Sasuke to go through what every other person in the clan had gone through, but his actions ultimately cost him everything he held dear. He feels betrayed due to Itachi's action, and yet he still loved him as a son. He both loves and hates Itachi, as well as feeling deep love but never showing said love for Sasuke. A complicated man that.

Scenes II

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 6: Scenes II

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** ", / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: Nothing much this chapter, just a lot of mixed scenes to build the story up. Some characters may seem a little OOC, but you get that now and again.

Chapter 6

(Hundreds of metres away from the demolished Sound base camp)

"O-Ha-Yo! Leader-sama, Mission accomplished!" Ruri sang in a cheery manner, practically dancing around the shadowy image of her new master. "See, the ring fits perfectly." Raising her hand, she showed off the reddish ring on her finger with pride.

Pein's expression didn't change as he gazed coolly at his new subordinate. "Good work. You will now focus your attention on finding the Rokubi and Nanabi. Do not engage them; I just want you to find their whereabouts with Zetsu. Once you have that information,

relay them to the others so that they may gather them. Their skills match those Bijyuu better than yours."

Raising an eyebrow in scepticism, Ruri couldn't help but question his decision. "You sure about that? After all, I am the inheritor of the Tenkun no Buki, which were created specifically to deal with demons, Bijyuu or otherwise." She tempted Pein with her words without seeming too forward with the suggestion.

"No. The usage of the Tenkun no buki results in too high a price. I need you relatively well in order for my plans to be fulfilled." Pein stated calmly, eyes not even blinking.

"Awww. Come on. It's not like I ever get any action around here." Ruri shrugged her shoulders in nonchalance, already excited about her next real fight, whenever it may come.

Pein's holographic eyes narrowed slightly in annoyance. "Show me your hands." He suddenly demanded.

Ruri stiffened and lifted her left hand up, visibly showing the delicate looking ring on her little finger.

"The other hand." Pein stated firmly.

Ruri slowly raised her right hand – the hand that she had used to summon Iwa no Hone (Bones of Stone) in her previous fight with the Sound forces. Even Zetsu, who stood some metres away, shifted uncomfortably at seeing the mutated hand. Fingers were elongated to abnormal lengths, and thin as bones, even the nails of Ruri's once delicate fingers had lengthened and hardened into crooked pieces of dead cells (1). The entire hand, up to the wrist had changed into a dry, brown colouring, highlighting the deformity of the spectacle. After examining her hand for a few long seconds, Ruri lowered it, hiding her appendage within the folds of her Akatsuki cloak. "It'll revert back to its original form within a few days, no worries there." She spoke calmly while keeping a straight face.

"Hmp. As stated before, usage of the Tenkun No Buki have their drawbacks. And I need you at your peak. You are not to summon any more of them unless I give you permission." Pein ordered, leaving no room for Ruri to argue.

"Tch. Nice to know you care." Ruri muttered under her breath, before giving off a shrug of indifference. "Sure, whatever. I'll just paddle along, trying to find the Rokubi or the Nanabi. Hai, oh great and mighty Pein-sama. Your wish is my command." She bowed in mock subservience.

"Make sure that you do." Pein ordered before his shadowy image flicked slightly before disappearing completely from the clearing that found both Ruri and Zetsu standing in.

" **YOU Surprise mE.** " Zetsu's deep voice resounded with intrigue. "I did not expect the Lady Oracle to be acting so childish. Especially in front of Leader-sama."

Giving another shrug of nonchalance, Ruri replied with a flair of indifference. "It's not as if he would punish me for my behaviour. In fact, no one can." Pausing in thought, Ruri answered softly. "It's not like that when you have a role to play; especially when you play the role of the high commander of the strictest village with the oldest traditions. I had the councillors literally breathing down my neck for every second of every minute of my life. I could not make a single mistake, less I want to suffer the consequences. It's not easy hiding yourself when you have a million eyes watching you constantly, but I prevailed."

Starting to walk away from Zetsu, Ruri didn't turn around to look at her plant-like companion, even as she continued with her story. "Now that I'm free. I can do whatever I want, be whomever I want. I don't need to act a certain way just because other people expect me to. I don't have anyone to judge me for my merits, and wouldn't care if they did judge me. This is the prize I attained when I joined Akatsuki. My freedom (2)." Her figure disappeared behind the foliage of the trees.

"Heh heh. Who'd ever thought one of the most powerful women in the world... **is nothing more than a brat living in a glass cage all her life.** " Zetsu chuckled softly to himself as he shuffled along the same path as his new partner.

Even though Ruri was some distance away, she still managed to hear Zetsu's muttered words and it made her pause. */ Glass cage? Perhaps that is what I've been living in all my life. The Kuunoki... was never really home... it didn't feel like home... just a place I live in. I have never found a home... not a real one. But then again, people say home is where the heart is... and my heart... is fragmented to several pieces placed with several precious people. My precious people – some dead, some alive. Yuuki... Naruto... Kaga... and... /*

(Hokage lounge)

Tsunade did her best not to show any nervousness or agitation as she faced the two elder councillors sitting across from her in the official Hokage lounge, often used for welcoming dignitaries. "So, what exactly have you called me to discuss?" She asked calmly.

"It's about the Kuunoki refugees, as well as Naruto." Koharu wasted no time in getting to the point. Looking over at her political partner briefly, Koharu then went into detail about their concerns. "We have some concerns in regards to letting the Kuunoki refugees stay here in Konoha. They obviously chose to come here after the collapse of the Kuunoki simply because Uzumaki is living here. If they somehow convince him to rebuild the Kuunoki with himself as the leader, then we will have some trouble on our hand. The fire country can not sustain 2 hidden villages. If they chose this path, then they will become a threat to Konoha's continual existence. No doubt the Fire Daimyo may well consider residents of the late-Kuunoki to be better Ninjas than our own crop." Koharu stated firmly.

"Not only that. We also have concerns over the status of Naruto himself." Homura interrupted with another issue at hand. "We finally have the Jinchuriki back after 2 and half years of wandering around.

You should not send him on missions that have a possibility of contact with Akatsuki. And considering his Aunt has now become a member of Akatsuki, it doubles the level of danger he is in. From now on, appoint high ranking Shinobi to be with him. Assign him to a four man team to reinforce our supervision and guard over him. Also, you should decrease his amount of missions as much as possible, and restrict the range of his movements. He hadn't had many missions since coming back to Konoha and we wish to keep it so." Homura finished.

"Hmp. Keep Naruto confined in the village? I don't know whether your so called 'concerns' over his welfare is because you fear the Akatsuki getting their hands on the Kyuubi or if you fear him suddenly deciding to re-start the Kuunoki and leave this village, taking the Kyuubi with him." Tsunade snapped in irritation, suddenly not feeling like hiding her emotions any further.

"Tsunade, we are making concessions here. Any other Jinchuriki would have been kept under constant supervision by the other villages. We should be no different. Coupled with the fact that he is the heir and currently only remaining loyal member of the Uzumaki clan, we cannot let him run wild without constraints." Homura responded back just as heatedly if in a more contained manner.

"I'll agree with the stationing of high ranking Shinobis for his guard. I'll even concede to the four man team if he stays in active duty. But I refuse to place such restrictions on his movements." After some consideration, Tsunade finally confirmed her decision.

"Tsunade! Be reasonable. That child is in constant danger. If we don't do this..." Koharu's passionate words were suddenly cut off by Tsunade's own fervent retort.

"As you said before, Naruto is treated like a royal by the Kuunoki refugees. He is precious to them, having just recently lost their Lady of hope. If we cage him in this village like some criminal, in the eyes of those refugees, we would be seen in a very bad light threatening their only remaining royal. I assure you they would not sit idly by and

watch in silence. They would fight for the freedom of Naruto and we would end up with riots in the streets, possibly a civil war." Tsunade debated back with just as much fire, not holding anything back.

"Second point – even if Naruto remains in the village, Akatsuki will still pursue him. Just like what just occurred in the Sand. If that were to happen, Konoha would also be placed in danger. If Naruto is on the move, while being guarded by some extremely powerful Ninja, that is the only way to both protect Naruto and Konoha at the same time. In fact, I believe that members of the late Kuunoki Gate Guardians have already taken the spot of protectors for Naruto. They would not let him get into any danger without a lot of backup. And do not forget that it was they who pushed Akatsuki back during the Sound Invasion over 2 years ago." Tsunade continued to rant, hammering her point across at her competitors of power. "You have to understand, I am also making concessions here." She snorted with the finality of her words.

Koharu only glared silently for a few chilling minutes. "So be it." She paused slightly before considering the rest of her words. "But what if the boy shows signs of wanting to leave Konoha and start his own village. After all, was it not his own blood related Aunt that betrayed the Kuunoki, leaving the village to be destroyed and joined with a group of S-class criminals? Such things may run in the family some say." She stated in a sarcastic manner.

Tsunade angrily slammed her hand onto the table before her. "You TAKE THAT BACK! Naruto is no traitor! He has and always will be loyal to Konoha! It's in his BLOOD!" The floor shook with tremors caused by the impact of Tsunade's palm against the table.

"Can you guarantee that, Tsunade?" Homura stated back with calm, frozen eyes. "Can you guarantee that Naruto will do nothing to endanger Konoha's continual existence, nor will he be captured by Akatsuki which will lead to the same results?"

"Naruto... will not be taken. I trust in that. There are too many people to protect him, too many willing to die for him. And he too, is anything

but slack. Naruto will grow strong, strong enough to counter the Akatsuki. I have faith in his ability, his strength, and his will to survive." Tsunade assured with strong emotions behind her words.

"And if that belief is mistaken, what will you do?" Koharu couldn't help but retort back, wanting to hear the specifics in Tsunade's words.

"If anything in the future places Konoha, or the Fire Country in danger, I will put my life on the line to save it! As Godaime Hokage, that I swear." Tsunade confirmed with strong conviction. "And I have no doubt that Naruto will be standing right beside me, helping all he can to save Konoha as well. After all, Konoha is his home."

(Naruto and Hinata's apartment)

"Naruto-kun?" Hinata knocked on Naruto's opened door as she peered in tentatively.

"Hey, Hinata. What's up?" Laying face up on his bed, Naruto glanced towards the ex-Hyuuga heiress with a small smile on his face.

"With everything that happened recently and with how everyone's been busy helping the refugees settle in, I guess all of us forgot to ask you a very important question." Hinata gazed down shyly, but her words never wavered or stuttered as she used to do when in his presence. That, more than anything, showcased her maturity and will to overcome her past short-comings.

"Oh, and what question would that be, Hinata?" Sitting up gracefully, Naruto looked towards the girl with a curious look in his eyes.

"How are *you* holding up, Naruto-kun? Only a few days ago, you lose your ability to see the future, and then you found out that the Kuunoki has been destroyed. It's practically your second home; you must feel awful about it. But I've never seen you sad or unhappy when you welcomed the refugees with open arms and helped them

settle into their new homes in the once abandoned Uchiha district. And then, when you found out about Ruri-sama betraying the Kuunoki, betraying you... you didn't look surprised or hurt. I just need you to tell me what you truly feel. You shouldn't bottle up your hurt inside and not show anyone. It's not healthy." Hinata explained reasonably, having gained the courage to walk across the distance between the two and settled herself down right beside the boy of her dreams. Now, more than ever, he needed a shoulder to lean on, a friend, not a person who had a crush on him wanting to gain an advantage.

Naruto only sighed heavily before looking up towards the ceiling. "Truthfully, I don't know what to feel." He admitted. "Aunt Ruri was brought up with the idea that as long as she continues to exist, the integrity and traditions of the Kuunoki will survive. That idea is firmly engraved into her belief systems. So in a sense, she viewed herself as an absolute monarchy. Regardless of how many Kuunoki citizens she sacrifices, they would still follow her blindly and worship her as they would a god. I can understand how tiring and lonely that must feel at times." He gave a sad smile, realising how hard it must have been for his Aunt to be placed on such a high pedestal and be looked at with such awe, but never be surrounded by the warmth of having close friends or family around. Now that the refugees have come to him for salvation, he could finally understand the enormity of the weight of such expectations on his own shoulders.

"As such, even though there are many people willing to die for her. She, herself, would only be willing to die for a few certain people whom she holds close to her heart. That is not to say she doesn't care for others. She loved the members of the Gate Guardians as she would her own children, but she understands that it is their job to protect her, not her job to protect them. Even if every one of them died in front of her eyes, she would be able to survive. But to be counted as one of her most precious people, people whom she would do anything to protect, that is something special. I think I can count on one hand how many she would go to such lengths for – my

mother, myself, Kaga-san, and possibly one other." Naruto paused in his reply, suddenly feeling tired of everything.

"That's sad." Hinata interrupted softly. "To only hold those few people close to heart... is truly a lonely existence. But... I can understand why she would value yourself and your mother, you're all family after all, but why Kaga-san?" She asked curiously.

Naruto gave a slightly saddened smile. "It's love." He stated succinctly. "Ruri and Kaga have a strong relationship, one that is based on their shared mutual affection from one another. If only she wasn't born into the Prophet house of the Uzumaki family, I think the two would have married ages ago. But she is, as such she was bound by the rules of the Prophet House traditions, being unable to love, never to have an intimate relationship with anyone or start their own families."

Giving another shrug, he continued with the rest of his contemplation. "I guess that's why I can't really hate her. Sure, there's some hurt, some disappointment, but I can't say I'm all that surprised." Noticing Hinata's shocked expression, Naruto decided to continue. "By doing this, she releases herself from the obligations of the Prophet house, as well as releases Kaga from his own duty as strictly that of a protector and servant of the Uzumaki family. Not only that, she also releases me from my own social chains. Now that the Kuunoki is gone, so is the entire Uzumaki clan system. There is no longer a need for dividing into the Prophet House or Breed house. No need to restrict the movements of anyone due to the status of their birth. I am free now to choose my own future and if I so wish it, I can get married and start a family of my own, raise my children in ways that are different to that of the now defunct Uzumaki clan. I personally believed that Aunt Ruri did all this not just for her own freedom, but for my sake as well." Naruto concluded.

"I'm glad to see that you haven't been too affected by all this." Hinata stated graciously, giving Naruto a small smile of encouragement. "But what will you do now?"

Huffing in thought, Naruto thought over the entire situation for a few long minutes before replying. "I think... I should send the Gate Guardians out as messengers to the other hidden villages. Just to let them know about the downfall of the Kuunoki and the existence of the Akatsuki."

"Now that they have Ruri on their side, there's no doubt they will start ramping up their efforts to collect the bijyuus, and the Hidden Villages need to prepare for their assaults. I, myself, will probably need to step up my training too. So yeah, that's my plan, inform all relevant parties of the impending danger and train as hard as hell to become stronger." Giving Hinata a classic Naruto grin of confidence, Naruto suddenly asked: "No time like the present to get started! Hinata, want to help me train?"

(Hokage lounge)

"Understood." Homura finally conceded. "Do what you want if you are that convinced. However, if you keep Naruto in his current 4 man team with Uchiha, Haruno and Hatake Kakashi – do you not believe that the other members are being disadvantaged by him being there?"

"What do you mean?" Tsunade narrowed her eyes again in suspicion.

"As you said before, the late Gate Guardians of the Kuunoki will have no doubt taken turns to surround Naruto in a protective manner. In this case, it would affect the teams' missions, having rotating guards around all the time. Not only will it affect the team dynamics but it might even impact on the success of missions itself." Homura explained in a rather convoluted manner, only hinting at true meaning he was trying to get across.

"You want me to take Naruto out of team 7, and have him fully guarded 24/7 by the Kuunoki gate guardians. That's what you're saying right?" She paused and thought over the scenario, before

grimacing with a wince. "It'll drive him mad. Naruto is a very independent person, and having lived the last who knows how long on his own, he's not going to like being hovered over so much, especially by the members of the Ex Gate Guardians."

"Perhaps you were right, giving Naruto the freedom to move around, even with those guardians, will help ease the transition." Koharu too, eventually calmed down enough to start thinking over the merits of Tsunade's decision. "I too, agree that keeping Naruto in team 7 will be more detrimental than anything else. Do not forget that the formation of Team 7 in the first place had always been controversial – especially in regard to the competitive relationship between the Uchiha and Naruto. The first time Team 7 was formed, it didn't last very long, only until the first Chuunin exam before the Uchiha was exchanged to another team which worked out much better."

"Indeed, not to mention, we also need to keep a close watch on the Uchiha. He did show signs of having traitorous thoughts towards Konoha after the first Chuunin Exam. We were lenient when we let him off the hook after saving a few civilians during the Sound invasion. But we never really took as much precaution as we should have in keeping a close eye on him." Homura said in a contemplative manner.

"I don't see the point." Tsunade snapped back immediately. "The boy was under the influence of Orochimaru's curse seal at the time. Now that he has full control over it, I don't see any point in keeping an eye on him. He's perfectly stable, mentally and physically."

"You can't guarantee that, Tsunade. The boy hadn't even gone through a psychological scan by our special Medics yet. He has returned a powerful Ninja, and as such must be closely watched. We propose a shift in teams once more. Keep Naruto on the move, but only have him accompanied either by high ranking Konoha Shinobis (namely Jounins) or keep him with the Kuunoki Guardians. As for team 7, we will choose a member to add to the four-man team." Homura stated reasonably, trying to force the Hokage to listen to reason.

Biting her lip in irritation, Tsunade knew that she had won the first round in regards to the restrictions on Naruto's movements, but even she can't win all battles against the councillors. It really made her angry how they continuously try to undermine her power and the way she do things. But at the same time, she understood their concern. It was only a few days ago when she got a visit from Oniyoubu Maya – the Ghost whisperer and future wife of one Uchiha Sasuke. The girl had told Tsunade that Sasuke was sick and would be staying home for the next few days. When asked for more reasons, the girl told Tsunade about the cleansing of the Uchiha district, how they encountered the Ghosts of Uchiha Fugaku and Mikoto, and the entire background story of the Uchiha massacre.

At first, she couldn't believe how far the councillors and that hated Danzo would go to ensure Konoha's so called safety - to massacre an entire clan in order to prevent civil war. She would not have been able to condone such actions. There had to be another way. But she wasn't Hokage at that time and she still didn't know the entire story. It was all in the past anyway and there is nothing she could do to change things.

Glancing back up at the elder councillors, Tsunade wondered to herself. */ If I keep on pushing against them, will they find a way to dethrone me as well, just like they did with the Uchiha? If they believed what I'm doing will cause the downfall of Konoha, how far will they go to ensure it's survival, even if it means bringing the entire village into the depths of hell? Regardless, I need to tread carefully. /*

"Alright. I'll agree to the changing of teams, as well as having you bring your own person onto Team 7." She finally agreed.

"Danzo, enter." Koharu called out. Almost immediately, the door slid open to reveal an old man with bandages over half his face and his right arm in a sling.

"You." Tsunade's eyes widened in remembrance.

"It's been a while, Tsunade-Hime." Danzo acknowledged, never using the 'Hokage' title when addressing Tsunade.

"I see, if you're here... then that means that the new member of team 7 is from the *Root Division* of the Anbu." Tsunade's eyes hardened at the sudden realisation of how she had fallen into the old man's trap.

(Inside Orochimaru's Southern Hideout)

Passing cell after cell of prisoners, Suzumi shivered slightly, feeling the icy gaze of almost all the men focussed solely on her presence as well as the one walking beside her. Releasing chakra into her ears, she focussed on the whispered conversations floating around her. Most of the men were curious about her presence. After all, everyone had heard of the Snake Queen (Kageru) and her faithful shadow (Suzumi herself) but few had truly seen them with their own eyes and lived to tell the tale.

"God! I'll be glad to get out of here." Hunching slightly, she tried hard to ignore both the stares and words directed at her.

"Ignore them." Kageru stated firmly, not even blinking at her surroundings.

Soon, they meet up with their target.

"I knew it." Karin stood before them, leaning slightly on one leg and proclaiming her superiority for the world to see. "I knew I felt the two of you a mile away. So, what the hell are you doing here? You're not exactly welcomed in my laboratory." She stated snidely, not at all welcoming the other two subordinates of Orochimaru.

"Orochimaru's dead. I'll be taking over Sound now." Kageru stated in a cool voice, wasting no time in getting to the point.

"HUH?!" Karin gave a comical face filled with shock and surprise. "Excuse me! What did you just say? OROCHIMARU is **DEAD** ???!!!"

She couldn't help but shout out in disbelief.

Unfortunately for Karin, her loud voice echoed all over the prison cells and it didn't take long for all the prisoners to overhear the conversation. Loud whispers and shouting erupted from the news, most with cheer and others with shock.

Ignoring the ever growing shouts around her, Karin continued to exclaim: "What the hell are you talking about?! What 'taking over Sound'? As if anyone would let you of all creatures lead! You're not even human? And let's not mention, I don't believe a single word of shit sprouting out of your mouth, Snake witch!"

"Regardless of what you may think or feel about the situation, I simply speak the truth." Kageru stated calmly. "Orochimaru is dead. I'm not sure by whose hand, but I know for a fact he is dead. I can no longer feel the connection to him. And the only way our connection can be severed is through death."

Tightening her fisted hands even further, Karin glared at her rival with all her mustered hatred and anger. "I'm not gonna listen to a word you say, so just get out of my sight!" She screeched loudly, making Suzumi wince in pain at the vibration of the sound.

"On the contrary, I will not allow you to disrupt my plans. I require your ability and knowledge for my own uses." Narrowing her eyes as a sign of her irritation, Kageru hissed in a threatening manner. "You do not wish to go against me, Karin..."

Taking a few steps back in hesitation, Karin bit her lip before showing off another false boost of bravado. "I refuse. You can't make me do anything I don't want to. Even if Orochimaru's dead, I'm not under any obligation to follow you around." She stated even as her voice wavered on the last word.

"And you believe you have a choice." Lifting a single finger, a large anaconda suddenly summoned itself out of Kageru's sleeve,

wrapping itself around the screaming Karin before tightening itself as a python would its prey.

"AHHHHH!!!! Get it off me! Get it off me! Get it off me!" Karin screeched at the top of her voice, until the large snake tightened itself further around her, making it difficult for her to breathe, let alone release any breath for screaming.

"As I said, you don't really have a choice. Willingly or not, you will aid me in my quest." Kageru stated calmly, her golden eyes never leaving the terrified form of Karin. Slowly walking towards the immobile form Kunoichi, Kageru stalked her prey as a predator would. Finally standing before the shivering form of her colleague, she struck her hand forward in a lightning fast move and shoved her fingers into Karin's stuttering mouth. In an instant, Karin felt a flash of lightning travel down her throat into the pits of her stomach, before she spat the hand out in disgust.

Coughing loudly and spitting out the aftertaste of having Kageru's hands inside her mouth, Karin spat out hateful words: "What the hell are you trying to do? Choke me to death!?"

Nonchalantly wiping her hand on a stray cloth she carried on herself, Kageru calmly answered back even as her giant snake disappeared into a puff of smoke, releasing Karin to fall flat on her bottom. "lie. I've just embedded one of my special snake curses inside your body (3). If you disobey my wishes, then you will get a rather shocking surprise."

As if to spite Karin, the curse suddenly activated, sending a sizzling spike of electrical charges all through out her body. Suffice to say, not only did she felt the pain of having almost every cell in her body vibrating due to the effects of the black lightning, but her body as a whole immediately slumped to the floor like a doll without strings. "Uh..." She gritted her teeth, lips hardly moving enough to portray her pain.

"As I stated earlier, you do not have a choice." Kageru stated in a tone of finality.

"Ano..., Kageru? If we take Karin with us, what the hell are we gonna do with all the prisoners?" Suzumi finally spoke up, her attention having stayed firmly on the reactions of the jailed captives, whom have all quietened down and watching the drama unfolding before their eyes with unmatched interest.

"They will come with us for now. I need to get rid of the curse seals on their bodies, and or heal them until they are fit enough to be set free. For those who still have homes, they may return to where they have come from once they are able. For those who do not, they are welcomed to follow me as subordinates." Kageru stated firmly, her eyes never leaving the struggling Karin.

Suzumi sweat dropped slightly at Kageru's straight forward but rather naïve words. "Ano... I know that most of them are fairly good people, whom have been captured and experimented on by Orochimaru. But what if some of them really are bad people? You know, of the violent sort? You don't really want to release them to the world, do you, Kageru?" She implored softly, willing her companion to understand the risks she takes in releasing all the detainees at one go.

"Regardless, anyone who have been used and abused by Orochimaru deserves a chance at freedom. I will not discriminate about people's past and misdeeds. The common link among us is our combined suffering under that retched man. I do not condole anything that man stands for and keeping these inmates under lock and key are his policies, not mine. If I wish to portray myself as his opposite, then I must show my firm but merciful side." Giving a sardonic grin, Kageru continued. "Not to mention, I have full confidence that if skirmishes did occur, I can handle it."

Suzumi sighed in response to her teammate's words. Kageru can be as stubborn as a mule sometimes. Once she set her mind on something, it's nigh impossible to change it. However, that

determined characteristic is what endeared her to many of her own supporters.

Although news of the Snake Queen and her bitch had travelled far and wide, everyone knew that they were two of Orochimaru's more noble subjects, simply because they never stabbed anyone in the back and had reputations for being fearsome but honourable in battle – something most of Orochimaru's underlings lacked. To say that no one within Orochimaru's ranks would support Kageru is a falsehood. Although she's not much liked by the higher echelons, Kageru is surprisingly quite popular among the lower ranking Shinobis, especially the female ninjas of Orochimaru's ranks. The girls looked upon Kageru – one of Orochimaru's highest ranked female generals - to be their idol and had aspirations to become like her when they grew up.

Suzumi was brought back from her wandering thoughts when Kageru spoke once more. "Suzumi. I need you to stay here with Karin. The two of you will organise a ship to bring all the inmates back to the mainland – to the central base camp. I need to collect Juugo and prepare the chamber. I leave the rest to you."

Sighing at hearing the order, the white haired girl could only nod in acceptance as her partner walked confidently off and out of their sight, leaving her with a building full of ex-prisoners to set free, a giant shipping transport to organise and a moaning, uncooperative Karin to help. / *Why me...* / She moaned mentally.

(Back in Konoha)

The next morning found Naruto standing beside his old team mates inside the Hokage's office, facing Tsunade's grim face. He had a feeling that whatever was about to happen, he wasn't going to be too happy about it.

"Thank you for coming in so early." Tsunade started her speech, eyes shifting from one member of the old team 7 to the next. "The

reason why you're been called in here today is due to a rearrangement of team members." She went straight to the point.

Sakura frowned in confusion. "Change in team members? Why, Tsunade-sama? We've only just reformed the old Team 7 with Naruto's arrival not to long ago, why are we being separated again?" She asked, with a slight tinge of pain in her voice. She had really wanted to start again with her old team members. Sure, the first time team 7 was formed; it was dysfunctional as any newly formed teams were. But she had really hoped that with all them together again, they could form stronger bonds between them. She wanted what all the other teams had, a strong friendship, understanding and comradeship among the team, something team 7 had blatantly lacked in its younger years and had only dissipated over time due to the long distance between each member.

Standing beside Sakura, Sasuke too frowned in disagreement. Behind the three, Kakashi stood nonchalantly, as if having expected this change.

Sighing slightly, Tsunade explained further. "The council has concerns over Naruto's welfare, now that Akatsuki is once again on the move. As such, I'll be appointing Jiraiya, an Anbu captain by the name of Yamato and one of the ex Gate Guardians to be placed with Naruto, forming a super-team if you wish. As for the rest of team 7, you will be receiving a new member from another division of the Anbu." Letting the words sink in a bit, Tsunade then turned her attention to the door. "You can come in now."

The door to the Hokage's office opened to admit Jiraiya – the Toad Sennin; an older man with short brown hair, dark eyes and a blank facial expression but wearing the standard Jounin uniform. Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura could only guess that this was the aforementioned ex-Anbu captain. Behind the tall man stood a young teenage looking boy, with short black hair that fell straight down his face, wearing an extremely fake smile. The boy wore a strange attire of skin tight shirt that only went down to mid-chest, and tight pants down his long legs.

"Naruto, Sakura, Sasuke. You already know Jiraiya, so he doesn't need any further introductions." Tsunade ignored Jiraiya's pout, knowing full well that her old team mate would have turned it into one of his weird dance intros, and she just wasn't in the mood to put up with it. "This is Yamato, your other team member, Naruto. Lastly, this is Sai, a member of the Anbu *Root* division." Kakashi's eyes narrowed slightly at the second last word, but outwardly, he showed no sign of his own feelings.

"Tsunade-sama. It seems to me that this arrangement is less about me having teammates than about me having bodyguards. I am not so weak that I need to be babysat in such a way." Naruto retorted in a calm manner, but underneath his nice tone was a fury at being treated this way. "I am not a child. I am a Shinobi, a strong one, and I can take care of myself, thank you very much."

Giving another sigh, Tsunade knew it was going to be a verbal battle to get Naruto to accept this. "I'm sorry, Naruto. But my hands are tied in this case. As Hokage, my job is to ensure the safety of the village, so I cannot risk Akatsuki coming here to capture you. At the same time, as someone who cares for you personally, I will do everything in my power to also keep you safe. The only way I can do that is to have strong people to guard and help you, while you are away from Konoha central."

"You're sending me away?" Naruto's eyes widened slightly at the implications of Tsunade's words. "You don't think I'm strong enough to hold off the Akatsuki? Don't forget, I did just that on my own during Orochimaru's invasion of Konoha all those years ago. I can..." Naruto's words were abruptly cut off by the rest of Tsunade's rebuttal.

"They were underestimating you at the time, Naruto. And they were also trying to get at you in a quiet manner. If they come to us now with guns a blazing and with no concern over the amount of damage caused or the number of lives lost, I know for a fact that we will fall just like the Kuunoki did!" All three teens winced at the mentioning of the fall of the Kuunoki. After all, if one of the oldest, strongest villages

(small as it was) could so easily fall to the Akatsuki, what were the entire Akatsuki truly capable of? "I do not doubt your strength, but even you must admit you're nowhere strong enough to face them, especially your aunt." Naruto bit his lip in pain. "I want you to be kept safe while giving you enough time to get stronger. For now, I'm going to send you on an errand to the Fire Capital. It's just a message delivery errand but once you get there, you'll probably be called into a meeting with the Fire Daimyo. After that, I want you to stay in the Fire Capital and train. Train to become stronger, Naruto." Tsunade pleaded with the young man, and even the Uzumaki heir had to eventually resign to his fate.

"Fine." Lowering his head in surrender, Naruto tried to negotiate the terms of his being sent away. "But I want Akiko Kazeha (4) as the third member of my so called team. I want to work on my wind elemental manipulation ability."

"Wind? What do you mean?" This time, it was Sasuke who asked. He hadn't spent as much time with his team mates since Naruto's return as he had liked, and he felt as if he was still missing a lot of information.

"I'm wind natured. I discovered that some time ago during my travels but I didn't know how to train on it." Naruto answered, seeing no reason to hold back his dilemma. "Akiko, being a wind mistress, would be able to help me greatly in cultivating that skill."

"Wait a minute? You're wind natured? If you weren't training on that all this time, then what were you working on?" Jiraiya piped up, curious as to what his prodigy had been wasting the last 2 and half years working on.

"Control over Kyuubi's chakra." Naruto's answer silently rocked the foundations of the entire room.

"Kyuubi? You've been working on drawing out the Kyuubi's chakra on your own? That's very dangerous, boy. You should have waited until your return, and have either myself or Jiraiya by your side when

you start drawing out the Kyuubi's destructive chakra. Don't gamble your life or the lives of others like that." Yamato's firm scolding surprised Naruto. The younger man squirmed slightly as he had never been talked to in such a manner in regard to his using Kyuubi's chakra before.

"Look. I had things under control. I went to a giant, deserted iceberg and trained there on my own. I needed to know my limits. I needed to know how much demonic chakra I can draw out while still remaining in control of my mind." Naruto justified heatedly.

"So, what were the results?" Jiraiya waved the other's concerns away, knowing full well how stubborn his student was when he felt he had done the right thing.

"At drawing out 10% of the Kyuubi's chakra, my eye's change colour (5). At 20%, I draw out one tail's worth of chakra. At 30%, I have two tails. At 40%, three tails. But once I reach 50%, when I gained the forth tail, that's my limit. I lose complete control of myself."

A few minutes later, the meeting was concluded with a decision that Naruto, Yamato, Jiraiya and Akiko (who was absent during the meeting) would be sent on the mission to the Fire capital the next day. In return, Sasuke, Sakura and Kakashi had left with their new team member Sai, mentioning something about learning each other's strength and weaknesses.

The former members of Team 7 found it curious that Sai hadn't said a single thing in through out the meeting, but then again, they weren't comfortable with Naruto's replacement yet to talk familiarly with him.

(Cloud Village)

Slamming both palms onto the sturdy table, a young man of 17 with short reddish brown hair pulled back by a bandanna forehead protector displaying proudly the symbol of the Hidden Cloud village,

glared heatedly at the older, dark skinned man before him. "What is the meaning of this, Raikaga-sama!?" He demanded.

The older man, with a strange looking white moustache and wearing the traditional gowns of a Kage, glared just as heatedly back at the young Shinobi. "What the hell are you talking about, Waisa Bado? (6)"

"I'm talking about Nii Yugito! Why did you send her out towards the outskirts of the Hidden Cloud village on her own, when you know full well that the Akatsuki are after her! We've already received a message from Konoha confirming that they have the freaking Lady Oracle join their cause! We cannot take this information lightly. We should be double, no, tripling the number of guards we have around Yugito, not send her on her own!" Bado practically screamed his response right at the face of his superior, seemingly unafraid of the consequences.

"You listen here, you brat! I am the Raikage and what I say goes! Yugito practically volunteered to be bait for the Akatsuki! She wanted to challenge them on her own, wanting to prove that she wasn't weak or needed protection. Had I not allowed her to do so, she would have done it even without my permission. Now, at least we know where she'll be and if it ever came to it, we could aid her!" The Raikage screamed back at his unruly subordinate.

"We'll be too late!" Bado insisted. "That girl and her god damn **pride** ." Bado cursed beneath his breath and was just about to continue his rant when the whole building suddenly shook as if an earthquake had occurred some distance away. "Shit! It's begun!" Bado cursed as he immediately jumped out the window, instead of using the door, smashing his way through the clear glass window and steel frames, raining pieces of glass shards all over the floor as he passed.

"God Damn it! Bado! Haven't you heard of doors?" Raikage cursed the Waisa clan heir even as his office door was slammed open to reveal several Jounin Shinobis wanting to check on his health. / You

better get there in time to save her, Bado. Or else you'll answer to ME! Damn it /

By the time Bado, and his partner, Sakeyama Asahi (7) made it to the location of the fight, they barely caught sight of the unconscious form of their fellow Cloud Nin and team mate – Nii Yugito – the Jinchuriki of the Two Tailed no Nekotama, carried off by a two faced man in the infamous Akatsuki cloak. "Let go of her, you Akatsuki scum!" Bado called out loudly but he was too late to stop Zetsu merge fully into the ground with his burden.

"AHHH!" Bado smashed his fist against the rubble ground that Zetsu had just disappeared into in frustration. Behind him, Asahi finally caught up with the young man. Asahi was taller than Bado with his spiked up, dark blue hair and he still wore his forehead protector in a slanted manner similar to how Zabuza had his.

"It's not over yet, Bado. Keep your head; we've still got some enemies to face." Asahi cautioned his gaze focussed on the 2 figures in the distance, both wearing the Akatsuki cloaks. "If I summon some of my Cats to try and track that man who took Yugito, we may be able to find a trace of them, and save her before the extraction begins. You with me?" Asahi finally caught Bado's attention with his words and even the passionate Waisa clan heir had to accept his partner's advice.

"Right, let's get to it. Summon your cats." Bado wasted no more time in encouraging his long time teammate, having come to appreciate Asahi's level headedness during missions. Well, Asahi was usually level-headed, the only time he wasn't calm was when he had to deal with his alcohol obsessed family, especially his sister. Having worked with Sakeyama Saporu, Asahi's half sister, for the first few years of his Ninja career, Bado could sympathise with the other man.

However, since returning from the Kuunoki Chuunin Exam, Bado had shed much of his arrogance and superiority complex. He was still loud and boastful, but now, he had the power to substantiate his

boasts. He worked damn hard in the last two and a half years to become a Jounin. Not only that, he had also (with the help of the Raikage) managed to overthrow the elders of his clan, whom had sanctioned experiments both on captives of other countries (Hyuuga's included) but on their own clan members (himself included) all in the name of gaining power. It was disgusting, and after regaining his lost memories of living through that torture, Bado wasted no time in calling out the elders on crimes against humanity, with evidence to prove it. Eventually, many older members of the Waisa clan were executed publicly, creating a stain on the Waisa name. But regardless, Bado himself was seen in relatively good light, having been the youngest person to reach Jounin in many years.

In regards to Asahi, after he returned to Kumo, he was shocked at finding out his sister had suddenly retired from being a Shinobi, and took up the family business of running the sales of alcohol. This left him being the sole heir of the Shinobi branch of the Sakeyama family. Needless to say, it took him a while to get use to the responsibilities, but he stepped up and took on the role with minimal fuss or problems. Issues arose later when Nii Yugito was put on their team as their third member. After a few rocky starts, the three eventually put aside their differences and formed a solid team. This was why Yugito was important to them, and they would do anything in the power to keep her safe.

Back to the situation at hand, Asahi didn't waste anytime biting into his thumb to draw some blood before running a few complicated hand seals and slamming his hand onto the ground. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu!" A large cloud of smoke exploded before clearing off to reveal twin looking house cats. Each had light grey coats, one eye green and the other a brilliant red. "Hey, Can you guys pick up the scents of the Akatsuki member who took away Yugito-chan. I know you guys loved Yugito-chan's scent the most." Asahi stroked the two cat's head, appeasing them first before asking them for a favour.

The two cats meowed happily at being pampered before the started sniffing the ground for various scents. Eventually, they both turned to

their summoner with quizzical expressions on their faces. "There were 3 scents other than Yugito-chans." One of the identical cats replied.

"Yeah, 2 of them fought Yugito-chan. But after the battle, they left that a way." The second cat pointed its adorably small paw towards the South.

"The third one took Yugito-chan underground. The scent has disappeared. I won't be able to follow him." The first cat sniffed with large tears developing in its eyes, hoping that its master will not be mad at their incompetence.

"It's okay. You two did great." Asahi patiently rubbed their heads and chins to bring up their spirits. Looking back at his partner, he stated seriously. "Seems like 3 Akatsuki members left this location after capturing Yugito, one escaped underground so we won't be able to track their scent anymore, and another two by foot, travelling towards the Southern direction."

"Right, Konoha's in the south. They're probably headed there. I need the bloody Raikage's permission to go after those two. We'll need more than the 2 of us to fight them." Bado surmised.

Nodding, Asahi turned back to his cute summons. "I want one of you to follow the scent that travelled South; and the other to stay by my side to relay any findings. Go!" One of the summoned cats flashed away towards its destinations, already tracking the fresh scents of the Akatsuki members, the other remained with its summoner.

"Let's go and report back to the Raikage. The faster we can scrounge up a team to hunt down Akatsuki, the better!" Bado commented, and the both of them quickly turned back towards the Raikage tower, hoping that they would be given permission to hunt down the bastards who had taken away a good friend of theirs.

(Somewhere far away)

"So, you say that you witnessed the Akatsuki hunt down and successfully capture the Sanbi, is that correct?" A young, cold voice enquired.

An older woman with long blue hair was slumped against a tree, bruises and cuts littered her form as if she had just come out of an intense battle. "Ah. There were two of them, one who uses self detonating bombs and the other wore a strange orange mask, but he didn't seem to use any recognisable technique." She spoke softly through her gritted teeth, still reeling from the pain of having faced two Akatsuki members and survived the ordeal.

"What were you doing here in the first place?" The first speaker revealed himself to be a young, teenage boy with bi-coloured hair – mostly spiky red with highlights of black, held back by a forehead protector displaying the symbol of the Hidden Mist village.

"My name... is Guren (8). I was given a mission from Orochimaru... to capture the Sanbi." Pausing to cough out some blood, Guren continued her story. "We had a child with us, Yukimaru, who could control the powers of the Sanbi. However, we did not expect the Akatsuki to arrive so soon. They killed Yukimaru, and all my other subordinates. I'm the only one left now." She spoke with effort; it seems the internal bleeding in her lungs caused by a rupture from a broken rib had finally started choking her with her own blood.

"I see. Thank you for the information, you have been a great help. I will now reward you with a quick death." The young Mist Nin stated as he withdrew the Katana from his back, ready to end Guren's miserable life.

"Wait. Tell me your name." Guren's eyes stayed calm, as if already accepting her end.

"Kapasu Juro (9), a new member of the 7 swordsmen of the Mist." The newly revealed Juro wasted no time in decapitating Guren's head from the rest of her body, ending her pain once and for all.

(Hokage Tower)

"I see, even that Chiriku..." Tsunade murmured slightly, eyes sad at hearing such news.

The monk kneeling before her had scratch marks on his face, as if having come out of a fierce battle. "I happened to be out on guard duty... and when I came back, it was already too late..." The man bit his lips hard to keep from crying.

Standing beside Tsunade, Shizune had a serious face. "They're probably making a thorough search of any place in the Fire country for Naruto. They've come at last... Thank god we sent him away in time."

Tsunade's eyes narrowed in determination. "Don't let them out of this country. Contact the newly organised **Nijyuu Shoutai (20 squads)** immediately."

Less than an hour later, Tsunade could be found standing in front of 80 strong Shinobis, members of the newly formed Nijyuu Shoutai, specially formed to counter the Akatsuki. Among them were Asuma, Shikamaru, Kotetsu and Izumo.

Once Tsunade finished her mission briefings, she continued to say. "I would like to find out about their plans, but these guys are simply too dangerous. In the event capture becomes impossible, eradicate them. Don't let them out of the Fire Country. Find them, no matter what. Go!"

With her words in their hearts, all 80 members of the Nijyuu Shoutai jumped away in all different directions, aiming for the Akatsuki.

"Tsunade-sama?" A voice called out to the Hokage from behind her. Tsunade turned to see Jubei (10) standing there calmly, still pale but with determined eyes. "I'd like to help in some way. I'll send out my rings as scouts, and if I see either the Akatsuki, or if any member of the Nijyuu Shotai come to harm, I can instantly teleport a member of

the my guardian teams to aid them." Pausing slightly, Jubei continued. "I want to get back at them. They took away our home, our livelihoods, our history, but most of all, they took away our precious lady. For that crime, I will make them pay." With that said, he turned away from the Hokage. Using one of his teleportation rings, enlarging it to human size; he lightly stepped through his ring and disappeared from sight. The ring too, immediately shrunk in size and flew away as if being pulled by an invisible string.

(A few days later)

"Come in." Tsunade announced as she looked up from her piles of paperwork. The door to her office opened as instructed.

"Umm. Tsunade-sama, there is someone here from the Hidden cloud village wanting to meet you." Shizune hesitantly stated.

"Oh?" An eyebrow lifted in curiosity. "Let them in."

Through the door, a female ninja entered. She had a bust as large as Tsunade's own, with short, straight blonde hair and small, sharp eyes; the ninja bowed slightly in acknowledgment before introducing herself. "My name is Samui (11). And I have been sent here as a messenger from the Raikage. We wish to work with Konoha Ninjas in the hunting of two Akatsuki members."

Now lifting both eyebrows in surprise, Tsunade asked for more clarification. "Oh, what is it that the Raikage is proposing?"

"Right as we speak, I have a platoon of four ninjas currently following the trail of 2 Akatsuki members through Fire Country. They were responsible for the capture of one of our own Ninjas, and although we were unable to follow her scent and rescue her, we wish to capture one of these 2 other Akatsuki members and find out more information. Specifically, we want to know where they've taken their hostage so that we may go and rescue her. Since this is Fire country and under your jurisdiction; we would like to have your permission

for us to hunt the Akatsuki in your region. And if possible, we can help each other out in the process." The newly introduced Cloud nin explained with a blank, serious expression on her face.

"Did you see that!? He freaking **sewed** that's guy's head back on to his body?" A female voice squeaked, slightly trembling in fear and disgust.

"Shut up!" A harsher, male voice countered the first. "I don't know how the hell Samui puts up with you guys, but even you should know to keep your mouth shut in a serious mission."

"Hey hey. Lay off man, it's our first mission going up against guys this strong and freaky. I mean, what's wrong with us being a little freaked out? We have the right to be, right? Or may be we should have expected something like this, something unexpected? Maybe..." A third voice mumbled off and on in the background, interrupting the first two voices.

"For the last time, shut up! You're gonna give our location away." The first male voice snapped at the other two before turning his attention to their forth member. "Do you have a good enough angle for a shot? Remember, we'll only get one chance at surprise." He reminded.

"Don't worry. I'm ready. And when I see the chance, I'll take it." A forth voice, also male, but much calmer and concentrated than the other two replied back.

Down below them, the four figures continued to watch vigilantly as a squad of four Konoha Shinobis (one Jounin and three Chuunin) combat against the two Akatsuki members. One of the Akatsuki members was some sort of immortal. Even having his head cut off by the injured Konoha jounin, he could still talk. And just now, the other Akatsuki member somehow managed to sew the first member's head back onto the rest of his body.

"Your ceremonies are long, but your battles and speeches take forever. Take on the guy with the bounty, everyone else is mine." Kakuzu chided Hidan after having to put his head back on to his body, literally.

Seeing their captain, Asuma, about to be killed, both Izumo and Kotetsu jumped into action. Kotetsu summoned forth a large, shell like hammer, before running forward with his weapon ready to bash the enemy in. Still standing a distance away, Izumo launched a jutsu of his own to accompany his partner. "Suiton: Mizuame Nabara! (Water Element: Syrup Snare Field)"

A large amount of syrup was spilt onto the floor by Izumi, flowing rapidly towards Kakuzu's location. Kotetsu then jumped high before throwing his weapon at Kakuzu hoping to crush him in. In retaliation, Kakuzu released his hands, flying through the air trying to stop the weapon; multiple vines made of metal ripped itself out of Kakuzu's appendages to block the weapon's flight. However, the strange looking shell weapon changed shape into a plane like shape, twisting and turning in mid air while avoiding all the metal vines that ripped out of Kakuzu's hands.

The weapon smashed heavily against the ground creating a large crater, but when the smoke and dust cleared, it was revealed that Kakuzu had simply stepped aside, letting the weapon smash harmlessly against the ground he was recently standing on, the summoned syrup too fell into the newly created hole, not affecting Kakuzu at all.

"We're not done yet!" Kotetsu yelled out passionately. It was then, that his weapon suddenly burst out of the ground behind Kakuzu and slammed hard against the back of the man, before flying towards its rightful owner once more. Glaring heatedly at them, Kakuzu was about to charge towards the two Chuunins when he found his feet was stuck due to the syrup that now submerged his shoes. Turning back, he finally realised that although the syrup fell into the first hole created by Kotetsu's weapon, it followed the weapon all the way out of the second hole and surrounded him even without him knowing.

Just before Kakuzu was about to launch his counter attack, something happened. Someone from atop the nearby building shot something at Hidan, and with a large burst of blood and gore, Hidan's brain had exploded into tiny pieces. "What the?" Quickly turning to look at the origin of the shot, Kakuzu suddenly noticed that they weren't alone anymore. There were 4 new players in this game, and they each wore a Hidden Cloud Village Hitaite.

"Damn it. More bugs." Not even caring about Hidan's now brainless body, Kakuzu stripped away the glue that held him captive against the syrup and ran towards the new enemies at high speed.

"SHIT! He noticed us!" A female voice echoed loudly just before Kakuzu smashed his iron fist against the roof of the building where the four Cloud Ninjas had situated themselves.

Back at the scene with the Hidan and the rest of the Konoha Ninjas, Shikamaru quickly ran towards his old Sensei and checked over the man's vital signs, although severely injured, he wasn't at the point of death just yet. Shikamaru then turned his attention back at the seemingly impossible to kill Akatsuki member, Hidan. Even with the head cut off from the rest of the body, he had still lived and was able to talk and complain. But how, with the top half of his face blasted away as if a small bomb had gone off near his head, Shikamaru could finally feel as if they have an actual chance at stopping these Akatsuki monsters. Hidan wasn't dead yet, his body and fingers were still twitching slightly, but without the top half of his head – the brain, the signals were obviously messed up, and therefore he was vulnerable to everything. Glancing at his fellow Konoha Ninjas, whom were preoccupied at watching Kakuzu fighting against the four member team of Kumo, Shikamaru finally made a decision on what to do.

"Kotetsu! Izumi! We need to secure this guy first! Don't give him the time or ability to heal himself! While he's still in this state, we need to capture him!" Shikamaru ordered as best as he could even while he cradled Asuma's unconscious body against his own. Even if he had wanted to help out the unexpected Cloud Ninjas with their fight, he

couldn't, simply because he was completely out of chakra. And even before that, he needed to secure the immortal one as well as his own team's survival first. */ Thank you. Whomever you are. I swear, I will come back to help you guys out. /* Shikamaru swore silently to himself.

Behind him, Izumi and Kotetsu quickly placed ready made seals on Hidan's body, cutting off chakra circulation and immobilising his body completely.

"Everyone, stay back! I'll take care of this guy! Asahi, back me up from a distance." The team leader of the Cloud ninjas ordered as he rushed forward to attack Kakuzu head on.

"Is he crazy? What was he thinking, taking that guy on his own!? I'm gonna back him up." The only female member of the group, a dark skinned girl with spiky black hair exclaimed before trying to join the battle with her commander.

"No, Karui (12), stay back. We'd only get in the way if we step in this time." Another dark skinned male Shinobi snapped back at the female ninja, holding her back from entering the fray.

"But Omoi! Bado can't handle that guy alone!" The girl, Karui argued back, struggling to escape the dark skinned youth's grip.

"Karui, there's a reason Bado's a jounin while we're just Chuunins. Not to mention, he even asked Asahi to back him up. He's not alone." Omoi, surprisingly the more restrained member of the two didn't let go of his teammate. While the two dark skinned cloud Ninjas stood aside and watched, Bado was fighting in a fierce hand to hand combat with the enemy.

Punches, elbows, kicks turn sweeps, jumping and somersaulting away only to run back into the fray and start the whole process again; Bado was keeping Kakuzu heavily occupied with his outstanding Taijutsu and Lightning armour. Each time Kakuzu tried to

gain an advantage by extending his hands and releasing the metallic wires embedded within his body to wrap around Bado's form, Bado releases short bursts of electrical charges through his lightning armour (13), which travelled down the wires and causing Kakuzu to have mild heart attacks. They were at a stalemate as their abilities comfortably balance each other's strength and weaknesses. Bado was fast, with stronger defences, Kakuzu was physically stronger, with greater offensive powers. However, it didn't help Kakuzu that his main elemental affinity was earth, while Bado's was obviously lightning.

After a few minutes of constant running around, dodging and attacking, Kakuzu decided to up the anti. Jumping away to put some distance between himself and the stubborn Cloud Nin, Kakuzu pulled his Akatsuki cloak away, ready to release the other creates hidden inside him.

However, his goals were cut short slightly when he felt something burn right through his heart as if a gun had shot a small bullet of compact fire across his body, all the way through from the front of his chest out of his back. Indeed, when he looked down, he was slightly shocked at the gapping hole he found in the middle of his chest, where his heart would have been located. */ Well, at least now I know what it felt like for Hidan when his head suddenly exploded. /* He thought mildly to himself.

Looking back up and focussing on the remaining Cloud Ninjas, he finally found his culprit. Asahi was kneeling on one knee and held his oriental staff up like he was holding a sniper, his eye level with the opening on the end of staff from where the 'bullet' obviously came out of. In fact, a small amount of smoke was still flowing out of the opening. */ So he's their long range fighter, no wonder Hidan didn't stand a chance. A team leader with exceptional Taijutsu skill and another member good at long distance assassination, just the two of them makes this team a formidable foe. /*

Kakuzu fell forward onto his knees first and then his face. He completely ignored the sighs of relief from the other Cloud ninjas, as

he concentrated on replacing his ruined heart with another one from his collection. Within a few seconds, he was climbing back up onto his feet and glaring at the shocked expressions on both the Kumo and Konoha Shinobis.

"No way! Asahi shot right through that guy's heart! I saw it with my own eyes! I did! There's just no way... How can he still be alive!?" Karui screeched in fright, her eyes were wide as can be.

Beside her, Omoi wasn't much better, having turned a sickly pale colour upon seeing the animated corpse. "Asahi never misses... Asahi never misses..." He tried to console himself but it wasn't working.

"Che. It's time to get serious." As Kakuzu spoke those few words, his back literally ripped open and four giant black masses burst out, forming individual creatures, each with a strange mask for a face. However, one of those masks was broken and even before it fully formed; it dissolved into a puddle on the floor.

"What the hell are THOSE!?" Karui couldn't help but scream, scrambling further away from the twisted creatures as Kakuzu's back miraculously sewed itself back together again.

Without any prompting, one of the masked creatures (the one with strange wing like contraptions) opened its mouth and a large gust of wind suddenly formed in front of it. "Fuuton Atsugai! (Wind Element: Bleeding Force)!"

The cloud ninjas barely had time to hightail it out of the immediately area before it was completely engulfed in hurricane strength winds ripping everything apart within a circular perimeter. Even Shikamaru, Kotetsu and Izumo had to move Asuma's body carefully as well as carry their prisoner while they fled the battle field, cursing that they should have included a Medic Nin in their group.

The other masked creatures weren't idle either. Having noticed that they had captured his partner as a prisoner, Kakuzu had no choice to

go after both teams. Two of the three creatures split apart and flew towards their respective prey, trying to do as much damage as possible.

"Raiton: Gian! (Lightning Element: Mock Darkness)!" One of the black creatures with a horned mask shot out a horrifying amount of lightning at Shikamaru and his compatriots, exploding the ground beneath them as they desperately made their escape.

"Katon: Zukokku! (Fire Element: Cranium Carver)!" The Cloud teams weren't faring much better, each making their way dodging shrapnel and bursts of fire from every angle.

When the two teams coincidentally met up in the same area, and the two masked creatures that followed them also arrived, they knew that they each had to help each other in order to survive. Bado jumped in front of the Konoha Ninjas, his hands outstretched, ready to absorb the enormous amount of lightning energy being released at their combined group.

On the other side, Kotetsu and Izumo had jumped in front of the Cloud ninjas, and both were quickly forming seals to counter the large firestorm coming their way. "Suiton: Suijin Heki (Water Element: Water Barrier)!" They both yelled in unison as they both summoned forth a large amount of water to create a tidal wave, obstructing the fierce fire from reaching them. Back on Bado's side, he barely managed to hold back the massive bolts of lightning all on his own. He knew that his hands were burning due to the intensity of the energy being absorbed and redirected to the ground through both his natural chakra circulatory system as well as his artificial one, and although it was still taxing he couldn't stop.

Eventually, the attacks died down, revealing an unharmed Kakuzu with all three of those masked creatures by his side. "Shit. Anyone has any idea how we kill this guy?" Omoi muttered, hoping for an answer.

Gasping slightly for breath, Bado was the one to rise to the occasion. "I can take him one on one. But it'll be too much if I have to worry about the mask creatures too." He admitted, even as he unleashed a scroll and summoned forth a large hammer.

"We need to somehow split them up and stop them from working together." Shikamaru concurred, having recognised Bado and Asahi as fellow examiners from the Kuunoki Chuunin exams some years ago, but still surprised at their growth compared to his own. "If one of you has a soldier you're willing to share, I can probably ensnare one or all three of them at one go. But someone's gonna have to be play distraction."

"Here." Asahi pulled out a small pack of soldier pills for Shikamaru. "Me and the other two can play distraction for you, right guys?" He directed his question at Karui and Omoi.

"Yeah sure." Karui shrugged hesitantly. Standing beside her, Omoi nodded in acceptance.

"Good." Swallowing the soldier pill, Shikamaru could feel his chakra revitalise. "Kotetsu, Izumo, you guys guard Asuma-sensei and that Hidan guy."

"Hai. The two Konoha Chuunins agreed without protests.

"Good. Let's dance." Pulling the giant hammer behind his back, Bado rushed forward towards the calmly standing Kakuzu. As he ran, Bado rotated the hammer via the handle before swinging it up and slamming it down onto the ground with a mighty heave. As the giant hammer impacted the ground where Kakuzu once stood (he jumped away obviously), Bado shouted out the name of his weapon: "Raikanazachi! (Lightning Hammer)(14)" Lightning erupted from the hammer surging across the ground in all directions, forcing Kakuzu to jump onto a near by tree.

Bado barely paused long enough to pull the hammer back up as if it weighed nothing at all, before rushing off towards Kakuzu's new

location. While Kakuzu jumped away from the tree that Bado had quickly incinerated with his lightning hammer, two of the masked creatures - wind and fire – suddenly flew in front of Bado, stopping him from going after Kakuzu. The two creatures merged into one large being with two masks. Suddenly, both masks opened its mouths, and out came a combined attack of both wind and fire.

Bado did his absolutely best to avoid being blasted either by air bullets or fire balls, or a combination of the two. While the merged masks were preoccupied with chasing Bado, Omoi and Karui suddenly appeared besides the flying being. And in an orchestrated dance, both pulled out their katanas and sliced at the merged creature with high speed sword swings. By the time, both Karui and Omoi landed back on the ground, the black thing that was once a creature with two masks crumbled into a multitude of pieces. "Well, at least we know it can still be cut."

On the other side, Asahi had been leading the Lightning oriented mask creature all over the battle field playing bait and avoiding the flares of lightning shot at him. Upon crossing paths with Shikamaru, the Konoha Chuunin suddenly performed a technique and ensnared the creature's shadow, immediately halting its movements. Swiftly turning around, Asahi fingered his staff back into a rifle position once more. Muttering softly to himself, Asahi released his now infamous assassination technique. "Fushichou Seikatsuba. (Phoenix Sacred Fire Spit) (15)"

The now easily recognisable fire bullet spat out of the staff that was held by Asahi, traversed the air at high velocity before smashing itself all the way through the Lightning oriented creature's mask, killing it instantly.

"And now, there's only one." Bado shouted triumphantly as he swung his hammer over and over again in an intricate dance to try and smash Kakuzu to death. However, the Akatsuki member was nothing if not swift and he managed to avoid most of Bado's attempts at his life. Truthfully, although Bado was dangerous at close hand combatant, Kakuzu was more worried about Asahi and his

assassination technique from a distance. If he put all his concentration on avoiding Bado, then he would be showing openings for Asahi to take advantage of. However, due to him concentrating on both Asahi and Bado at the same time, he never noticed until too late that he had been captured by one of Shikamaru's shadow binds.

"Gotcha!" Shikamaru smirked in tiredness at finally capturing the other prey. Shifting one of the hand seals, he changed the Shadow neck bind to a Shadow sewing technique, creating many multiple shadow tentacles stabbing and holding Kakuzu's body in place.

Now, with only one heart remaining inside his body, Kakuzu was a little bit too preoccupied with using his own internal wires to counter Shikamaru's own. "Damn. I underestimated you guys too much. To have taken out all four of my collective hearts... I will not forgive you for this transgression." The rest of Kakuzu's threats were cut short as a lightning laced hand stabbed through his chest, crushing his heart all the way through.

Behind him, Bado stated angrily. "This is for my team mate, Nii Yugito. Remember it as you pass into hell."

Kageru stood before a large area that was once the base of Orochimaru's hideout. There were craters, blood stained sand, uprooted trees and debris littered everywhere. However, it seemed all the bodies of the dead had already been burnt and or dumped in mass graves since she could still smell the combined scent of burnt, rotting flesh.

Sensing a few live chakra sources, she followed the trails left by the surviving members of Orochimaru's once large army, before coming to a small encampment, which held less than a dozen former Sound Ninjas, including the one she was looking for. However, upon entering the tent, her priorities shifted.

"Just look who the cat dragged in, you fucking whore! Where the hell have you been? We fucking needed you and you weren't here to

help, you piece of shit!" Immediately, Hito launched into a series of foul mouth swearing at her former comrade in arms. What had once been a proud member of the infamous Sound Four, Gojou Hito had become bitter and resentful of the entire world as a whole.

Lying beside her was the dying form of Kimimaro. How he had survived these last few days, she didn't know. But the bone user had lost a lot of blood with the loss of his left arm. Luckily, Juugo had fused with Kimimaro's body, providing his own flesh and chakra to stop the continual bleeding (16). Unfortunately, the onslaught of illness followed due to Kimimaro overexerting himself during the fight. Sitting on the other side of Kimimaro, a younger looking Juugo hugged his knees, trembling in fear at the thoughts of his best friend's potential death.

Sighing slightly at the sorry state of her former comrades, Kageru knelt down next to the prone form of Kimimaro. Placing her hand gently against his feverish forehead, Kageru concentrated, wanting to transfer some of her own bodies' immunities as well as basic strength into Kimimaro's body. While doing that, she asked for a status update on their troops, as well as an explanation of what happened.

"Akatsuki happened, that's what. That Lady Ruri bitch, the one who betrayed her village and joined up with the Akatsuki showed up suddenly, summoned a massive skeleton dinosaur thing and had us completely destroyed. While we were trying to survive that thing, she went into the base and killed off Orochimaru. Orochimaru's dead and it's your entire fault! Now, you tell me where the fuck were you when we needed you?!" Hito condescending voice echoed loudly.

"I was away at the Southern Hideout. And I couldn't care less if Orochimaru died. Now, where is Kabuto?" Kageru answered succinctly.

"Wha..." Hito was about to launch into another full blown argument, when Juugo interrupted.

"He left. He abandoned the base and everyone here. He took some of Orochimaru's experiments and just left us here to die. Some of the troops have left as well, while others, the ones that still feared us, stayed." Juugo mumbled softly, his eyes never leaving Kimimaro's sickly form.

"I see. This would actually help my situation. Listen up you two. From now on, I am the leader of the surviving Sound Village. Anyone who does not wish to follow me, you may leave, but the next time I see you, we will be enemies. For those who join me, I can promise you that you will not regret it." Rising to her feet, Kageru gave a commanding presence while the others could only watch and gulp in slight hesitation, wondering what a ninja army ran by Kageru – the Snake witch would be like.

End

(1) I've got a picture of this on my website; go to my profiles page for links.

(2) I know that some of you will be wondering about Ruri's sudden change in personality, so I wanted to give this explanation on why I suddenly changed her serious nature to this rebellious, childish one. Sometimes, people change due to whatever reason. A perfectly well behaved person would be tempted to be rebellious when given the chance, and that is what Ruri had been given; hence her wild and slightly callous behaviour.

(3) Inspired from the manga/anime Soul Eater , where the witch Medusa was able to force another witch to swallow her snake curse and then control the witch victim as she wishes.

(4) Kazeha Akiko is the wind mistress of the Kuunoki Gate Guardians. She's the one with the long red hair tied in a braid, often seen wearing a green tank-top and short blue shorts. She also carries with her a giant Boomerang. She first appeared in Restoration of Faith , as one of the Kuunoki Gate Guardians saving

Naruto from the clutches of Akatsuki during Orochimaru's second invasion of Konoha. She then reappeared as an examiner for the Kuunoki Chuunin Exams. And she last appeared in Trials of Faith , trying to stop Akatsuki from entering the Kuunoki to capture Ruri.

(5) Inspired by the manga/anime Claymore . The half human half Youma Claymore warriors change their eye colours from silver white to brilliant gold when they use 10% of their Youki. After that, their bodies start bulging with veins and or deforming towards their Youma half instead of staying in their human form.

(6) Waisa Bado was the original character introduced in Restoration of Faith , chapter 28. He was the arrogant, obnoxious, self-absorbed cloud Nin that battled against Hinata and hurt her badly with his own form of Absolute Defence. In the second round, he fought in a 4 way battle against Neji and lost. Although he likes to portray himself as a powerful offensive fighter, his true abilities lie in his defensive power. At the end of the Chuunin Exams, Waisa Bado was punished by Naruto for inciting a fight among the contestants which resulting in some property damage in the Kuunoki. Having suffered the affects of the Tenkun no Buki (Kurei Hiraisho), Bado's mind shattered, releasing hidden and forgotten memories of how he was experimented on by his own family in order to perfect their absolute defence. He left the Kuunoki village a changed man. Since then, Bado has worked his way quickly to the top, becoming a Jounin at 17 and then supporting the new Raikage into power, while overthrowing his own clan elders in a small Coup etat.

(7) Sakeyama Asahi was another original character introduced in Restoration of Faith , chapter 28 He was the self-conscious, quiet guy in the background of the Cloud team, terribly embarrassed by his alcohol-obsessed sister, and his other arrogant, self-righteous teammate. After spending several months in the Kuunoki under the apprenticeship of one of the Kuunoki members, Asahi was welcomed by the Hidden Cloud village a hero. It wasn't long before he was proclaimed the new heir to the Shinobi branch of Sakeyama clan. Upon that announcement, his sister (Sakeyama Saporu) immediately

gave him her summoning contract for the Nekos and started getting really into the Business branch of the Sakeyama family, running the sales of alcohol all over the country and beyond.

(8) Yes, this is the same Guren from the Sanbi arc in the Naruto Canon. I wanted to state briefly that Akatsuki had captured the Sanbi as well as introduce future characters that may come into play. And what better way then to show that Guren (and the host of other characters, Yukimaru included) had tried to get their hands of the Sanbi, but instead of Konoha disrupting them, it was the Akatsuki, with devastating consequences. I never really did like Yukimaru, he annoyed me. So yeah, both are dead now.

(9) Kapasu Juro, is an original character that participated in the Kuunoki Chuunin exam some years ago, he first appeared in Restoration of Faith , chapter 28. He was the grandson of a former Swordsman of the Mist, but due to certain circumstances, he was a weak and useless Ninja for most of his life, having been protected by his other 2 teammates. However, at the end of the Kuunoki Chuunin exams, one of his teammates was killed in front of him by Hoshigaki Kisame, and the other teammate fell into a deep coma. Since then, Juro had become an avenger, obsessed with killing Kisame.

(10) Dokudes (Hyuuga) Jubei, the older half brother of Hinata and Hanabi. He was the unregistered son of Hyuuga Hiashi, conceived due to an affair with a Kuunoki Shinobi. After the betrayal and death of Jubei's mother, there's been bad blood between the Dokudes clan and the Hyuugas'. He has long lilac hair, pale eyes of the Hyuuga, and often seen in a white sleeveless shirt and long white pants. He wears hundreds of rings around his body (ears, neck, arms, wrists, ankles and waist) which are also his weapons. The rings can be used to fight, lift him into the air and or teleport things from one ring to another instantly, regardless of distance. It can also be used for spying. He first appeared in Restoration of Faith , as the leader of the Kuunoki Gate Guardians saving Naruto from the clutches of Akatsuki during Orochimaru's second invasion of Konoha. He then reappeared as the instigator examiner for the Kuunoki Chuunin

Exams. And he last appeared briefly in Trials of Faith , trying to stop Akatsuki from entering the Kuunoki to capture Ruri. He was the one who led the Kuunoki refugees to Konoha after their home was destroyed.

(11) One of the new Cannon characters introduced in the Naruto Manga. Please note, this is NOT an Original Character.

(12) Karui and Omoi are both new characters introduced in the Naruto Manga.

(13) Lightning armour is an absolute defensive type technique that only Bado can use, he basically uses the artificial chakra circulatory system created by the sashes and clasps he wears around his body to fuel an invisible armour of lightning, preventing both chakra attacks from hurting him as well as minimizing the force of any physical attacks. This technique was described in Restoration of Faith , chapter 30 when Bado was fighting against Neji in the Chuunin Exams.

(14) To read about the Lightning Hammer, please go to the character profiles page for Waisa Bado on my website, links are in my Profile's page.

(15) To read about the Lightning Hammer, please go to the character profiles page for Sakeyama Asahi on my website, links are in my Profile's page. This technique was also described in Restoration of Faith, chapter 35 when he fought against Kageru.

(16) In the cannon manga, Juugo fused his flesh and chakra with Sasuke, saving Sasuke's life. But as a result, he changed into a child-like state. That's what happened here between Juugo and Kimimaro.

Yay! Another chapter finished!

Scenes III

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 7: Scenes III

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** ", */ Thoughts /*, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: 2 years of nothing and I finally produce the next chapter. Hope you like

Chapter 7

(Konoha Hospital)

Asuma woke in the evening (1). His eyes opened and blinked in the dimming orange sunlight that streamed into his hospital room. Turning his head slightly, he focussed on the relieved face of his wife, Kurenai. Her pale complexion had tear stains down her face, obviously having been crying. It a was sight worth dying for, even though he never meant to cause her such pain.

"I'm sorry. I must have scared you." He whispered; his throat sour and throaty.

Kurenai shook her head but pulling one of his hands gently into her own. "You survived. For that, I'm grateful." Sniffing slightly, she quickly wiped away any incoming tears. "Although Tsunade-sama was able to heal the tears in your muscle, arteries and veins, there was some cellular damage that even she couldn't heal. You will always have a small limp when you walk. It isn't enough to affect your Shinobi life much; but because of this perceived weakness, she's going to ask you to stop taking active assignments."

Keeping his gaze focussed on his wife, he could tell from just the look in her eyes how scared she had been to losing him. He couldn't put her through that again, and so, Asuma made a vow to himself on that day. He would live for his family. He wasn't as strong as his father, the Sandaime, who managed to be a Hokage and still be a father at the same time. For him, he chose to be a father, above the duties as a Shinobi. "Hai. I'll take a desk job or even help out Iruka at the Academy, no more running around after Akatsuki for this old man." He gave her a quirky smile even as her eyes lit up in relief and pure happiness.

(Hokage Office)

Tsunade read the note for a third time before finally digesting the words. After a small eternity, she finally spoke. "Orochimaru's dead. He was killed by Ruri around 5 days ago." She lifted her head to look over the various expressions on her audiences. Shock, relief, anger were just some of the emotions she could identify.

Surprisingly, it was Kaga who broke the silence. "Are you sure?" His once proud and strong voice practically whimpered. It was painful seeing how thin he had become since his stay in Konoha. Each day he ate less and less. Not only was his failing physical health worrying, but his emotional state was in tatters. To be abandoned by the one person he loved more than anything else, to be thrown aside as if he was never important to her in the first place, was devastating for Kaga.

Tsunade hardened her heart before confirming. "Yes, I'm sure. We have several eye witness accounts from the surviving members of Orochimaru's forces that were captured and interrogated by our Anbu. It seems that the Sound forces are now in disarray. Many have fled and become mercenaries or bandits preying on the weak. Kabuto has disappeared completely off the radar. And I have some information that one of the high echelons of Orochimaru's generals – one Kageru Sasayaki is slowly building herself up as the new Oto ruler. But who knows if she'll turn out to be just another Orochimaru." She muttered hesitantly, not wanting to deal with another Orochimaru-look a like.

"I highly doubt that." Again, it was surprising that Jubei actually came to the Snake Queen's defence. "Last I heard of Kageru, she had build up a reputation as a fearsome but honourable Shinobi. Yes, she can be merciless and would not hesitate on taking up missions such as assassinations, but in all of her missions, she has never killed an innocent person before."

"About 6 months ago, she was on a mission to the South I believe. We didn't have any information on what she was doing in the south, but she managed to single-handedly stop an invasion force from the supposedly-extinct Sky Ninjas." Dokudes Seiko piped in as well, having been on a mission outside of the Kuunoki at the same time and overseen the situation in her travels briefly. "What impressed me was that she did it all without killing a single person, but instead incapacitating them, breaking bones, severing their Chakra, and destroyed all their technology." Pausing slightly, she further commented. "She saved hundreds, maybe thousands of lives without anyone knowing her deed. Had the Sora Ninjas actually put their plans of attack into play, I have no doubts that Konoha would have suffered large numbers of casualties, and not to mention the other villages that were in the way (2)."

"Regardless, until we've spoken to or met with an official messenger from this new Oto Ruler, I'll keep my reservations on how to proceed." Tsunade stated with finality.

"On other news, the Raikage has called for a 5 Kage summit to be held in Iron Country in 3 weeks time. It seems losing the Nibi Jinchuriki had really hurt him hard. Anyway, I have already decided to go and will be bringing along 3 body guards." Tsunade stated seriously, surprising many people in her office. "Also, we'll need to finish our examination of both those Akatsuki member's bodies and compile our reports on their memories and any information we can extract from them. I had sent a messages of thanks to the Raikage for his shinobi's assistance during the whole battle, but I'm also going to be sending them a present as thanks when his shinobis leave to go home. The only question is what..." She concluded, remembering the still headless Hidan in custody as well as the multiple bodies of the late Kakuzu, and knowing that politically, she now owed the Lightning leader, which left a bad taste in her mouth.

"Koushiro and Hikari can return to Kumo with those shinobis. They have had dealings with the Raikage before and are 'un-officially' distant relatives (3). They could be our ambassadors, showing our thanks for their actions." Jubei stated this idea tentatively. "I also have Yami, Mishizu and Tori (4) travelling around the elemental nations spreading the news about Akatsuki and the upcoming dangers."

"Thank you for that Jubei." Tsunade nodded in thanks. Looking up, she issued the rest of her orders. "Shizune, you and Sakura will work on the autopsy of Kakuzu's body. Give me everything you can. Shikamaru! You will work with Yamanaka Inochi, Mitarashi Anko and Ibiki to interrogate Hidan. I don't care what it takes; get me everything you can on the Akatsuki members and what they are capable of. Jubei, I want you acting as a central coordinator of information and transporting my people to where they are needed most. I almost lost Asuma in the fight, I will not lose more."

"Hai! Hokage-sama!" came the corresponding chorus.

(Fire Nation Capital)

Jiraiya strutted as he traversed across well worn stone streets, passing through one of the six massive doorways leading into the Fire Nation's Capital – the Akaiju. The city was aptly named the 'Red Pearl' (5); the walls that surrounded the massive city were not made from the huge trees like Konoha's border walls. These massive 30 metre high walls were all bricked, and painted in a deep red colour that made it stand out among of the tall trees and agricultural farmlands that surrounds the imperial capital. Of course having the giant metropolis city built on the side of a hill overlooking the thousands of acres surrounding it was also a good help.

Again, unlike Konoha's roundish design, the capital city of Akaiju was square in shape. It's grid like roads and pathways created a complicated and yet effective routes connecting traders from the east side of the city to the west. It also beheld one of the world's best known underground waste tunnel and water ways; bringing clean water to every household and proper public toilets and bathing areas through out the city.

The city was built and designed to incorporate 5 rings/or squares. The outer ring or commonly referred to as the 5th square is a giant plain used as a demilitarised zone where large garrisons of soldiers and city guards set up defensive fortress against sieges and such from their enemies. The 4th ring consists of farmlands and agricultural area. The 3rd ring or often referred to as the middle square is the lower level residential area where the majority of city dwellers reside in tight urban housing, one stacked on top of another. This 2nd ring consists of the aristocrats and middle class wage earners; they live in semi detached houses, some with spacious gardens, parks and lakes surrounding them. The inner ring or first square is where the Daimyo and his closest ministers reside – the actual imperial palace within the large city.

The streets were busy with carts, businesses, street performances and a multitude of other distractions but Jiraiya was not deterred from his deep thoughts. Sighing slightly while looking up, Jiraiya saw multiple highways of overarching stone bridges that crisscrossed

over the roofs of many two to three story buildings (6). He watched silently as a stone cart full of what looked like fresh vegetables whizz pass on one of the bridges. */ I swear I will never get use to seeing those. I still can't believe they use those arched bridges to move goods from one place to another. It's like a train but on high stilted bridges! /*

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, he refocused on the problems on hand. After his short meeting with the Daimyo of Fire country, reaffirming their commitment to support one another (Shinobi Village and Fire country) against the upcoming war that is brimming in the future, he had met up with some of his spy couriers and received a message from Tsunade. The news he received did not bode well.

*/We've got confirmation that the Ichibi, Nibi, Sanbi, Yonbi and Gobi are now in Akatsuki's hands. The Mist village confirms that the Rokubi Jinchuriki is missing. From memory, the Nanbi Jinchuriki reside with our allies, the Hidden Water Fall village. I know Tsunade said that she's gonna send some shinobis to protect that Jinchuriki, but I really don't think we have any one in Konoha that is on par with Akatsuki. Unless she sent the Kuunoki shinobis, then maybe. So that just leaves the Hachibi Jinchuriki in Cloud and Naruto. Damn, I had hoped I had more time to prepare Naruto. /*Jiraiya signed again, rubbing the juncture between his eyes to try and stop the incoming headache.

/ The good news is that Orochi-teme is dead. / He paused at that thought, not sure how he should feel about the death of his long time teammate and greatest traitor in Konoha history. Shaking his head, he decided not to dwell too much into those thoughts. */ I'll deal with it later. Now, I should focus on the upcoming 5 Kage summit that has been called by Cloud. /*

Looking up, he suddenly noticed that he had bypassed all three inner rings of the city and had finally made it to his destination, the outer ring where he could see some 500 Narutos busy slicing up what looks to be a live waterfall, and another 500 working on the new

jutsu, plus one Naruto sitting quietly with Akiko meditating. Seeing how his student multitask between the three different regimes still amazed him at times, and this was one of those times. Not only is Naruto training his nature manipulation, he was working on incorporating wind natured chakra with the power of the Rasengan, and lastly he was starting to learn how to gather nature chakra with Akiko.

I You know, it always surprised me that Akiko is a Sage, like me. I didn't think that there was anyone else in the world who studied natured chakra and could manipulate it by becoming a sage. Guess that shows how much I know. Huh? / Scratching the side of his face, Jiraiya snorted before announcing his return. "Yo. Stop for a little bit, Naruto. I have some news. Good and bad."

After spending a few minutes relaying all updates he has received from his spy network as well as anything else useful provided by Tsunade, the four member team (Yamato, Naruto, Akiko and Jiraiya) settled in silence, taking in and disseminating the information.

"So things are moving rapidly, I see." Naruto paused before asking. "Do you know who she's gonna send to protect the Nanabi Jinchuriki, and who she'll be taking with her to the Kage summit? It's going to be held in a few weeks, right?"

"Yeah, the Raikage called for it to be held in the neutral country of Iron country in 3 weeks time. The country is formed from three mountains called the three wolves. It's a neutral country with its own particular culture and authority, and a strong military presence. They don't have any ninjas, but samurai protecting them. Tsunade will need to make arrangements to have someone look after Konoha while she's away. Hell, she may even call me back to be one of her guards, you never know with her." Scratching his head, Jiraiya was a bit annoyed at being called back, if the circumstances did turn out that way.

"I thought she wanted you to stay to train me up." Naruto looked in confusion at his sensei.

Jiraiya shrugged. "The truth is there's nothing much else I can teach you kid. You already know all the different rasengan types there are, you know of my mud and spy jutsus. You know how to summon toads and their differing battle capabilities. The only thing you can still learn from me is sage techniques. And to tell you the truth, I don't have the patience to teach that. Akiko here is probably better at it than I am." He indicated by nudging the young red head sitting next to him.

Akiko pouted slightly at the comparison. "But our sage techniques are very different." She complained out loud. "You go into 'Sage-mode'" Akiko emphasised by imitating the 'inverted commas' with her hands. "To battle your enemies physically using that unique fighting style called 'Frog-fu'."

Shaking her head she continued. "I can't even move much once I'm in my version of sage-mode. Instead I heightened my chakra manipulation ability and am able to call upon fierce winds, rain and lightning to my aid. I literally become a weather witch, able to command the elements to my will and destroy my enemies for me. I very rarely move if at all." Shrugging again, she concluded her arguments. "I guess that's the difference between a offensive style sage battle mode like yours, and a defensive style sage mode like mine. I don't fight in sage mode, I but destroy anything that is in my way (friend or foe) using wide scale attacks, all for the purposes of protecting my immobile body."

"Really? There's such a difference in techniques, even though both of you turn into sage mode by absorbing the natural or senjutsu chakra around you? I didn't know that." Naruto said thoughtfully before frowning. "I've seen ero-sensei's sage mode before." He stated, ignoring the irritated 'Hey' that came his way. "And he looked kinda frog-ish or toad-ish. I'm assuming that's because he learnt the frog style sage mode. What about you, Akiko-san? What do you look like when in sage mode?" He asked curiously.

Akiko blushed slightly at that question. "You have to understand, Naruto-sama. That when I'm in sage-mode, which very rarely

happens. I don't consciously control my powers anymore. I drift back to instinctive behaviour; any enemies are destroyed with no mercy shown." Her gaze turned sad at this point. "I've been working on controlling my powers with Ruri-sama and Kaga-sama, but I'm still not a hundred percent confident in controlling myself in sage-mode yet. Anyway, back to your question, I've been told that my hair turns pure white, same with my eyes – there literally is no pupil or iris when I'm in sage mode. My hair tie always rips and my hair flies around all over the air as if with a mind of its own. And lastly, I'm told I start to float in air with nothing holding me up there."

"Wow. Like a deity commanding the skies then. I suppose that's the reason why others sometimes call you the weather witch." Yamato spoke up from the first time, still finding it hard to comprehend the sheer power over nature chakra in order to manipulate it to such a point that would enable its wielder to fly. "I can understand wind manipulation as that is your primary chakra nature, is water and lightning your secondary chakra nature, Akiko-san?" Yamato enquired politely.

Akiko shrugged again. "I don't know. I don't use water or lightning attacks normally. In fact, I can't use those 2 elements, I'm primarily a wind user. However, in sage mode, I'm able to add those 2 elements together with my wind ability, creating things like ice storms or cold lightning. It's really weird." Smiling embarrassingly at the others. "I've always been told by Kazeha-ojisan (7) that I'm a bit of an odd ball. I have a lot of potential but no one really knows my actual limits. Because every time I think I've reached the limits of my ability, something always happens to throw a spanner in the works."

Nodding in understanding, having had to go through similar situations himself, Yamato decided to change the subject a little. "Well, I would recommend that Naruto-san learns both types of sage abilities. This will enable him to both offensive and defensive."

However, before he can continue both Akiko and Jiraiya shook their heads. "It doesn't work like that, Yamato." Jiraiya commented sadly and Akiko continued the rest of the explanation. "Senjutsu, or sage

art, is a very personal stylised art. If a person have an inherit defensive characteristic, they will be prone to develop sage abilities similar to my own, that is, if they achieved sage mode in the first place. Someone whose quite outgoing and aggressive will always lean towards offensive type sage ability. Naruto-sama is a fighter, and as such, Jiraiya-sama's sage mode ability will suit him better. If it was someone like..." Akiko paused, trying to find a good comparison. "Tsunade or Ruri-sama, then they will lean more towards my type of defensive techniques. I can teach Naruto-sama the basics on how to gather sage energy and the such. But after that, he must learn from someone else who can teach him the rest of the attack styles."

"Which means..." Jiraiya interrupted. "That it's probably best that you learn from the original masters of frog sage mode." Nodding to himself as if having come to a decision. "Naruto, once you've completed the basics here, learned wind manipulation and combined with rasengan, I'll bring you to Myouboku Zan, where the original masters reside." Shrugging ahead, he stated. "I need their permission anyway to teach it to you."

"Okay, that's the plan then." Nodding in agreement, Naruto stood up and called upon a thousand Kage Bunshins once more. "You know what to do." He stated simply and the clones immediately got to work. Half of them returned to cutting water, leaves and anything they could get their hands on. The other half returned to working on the Rasengan with wind manipulation.

"How is the progress on everything else anyway." Jiraiya asked for an update from the 2 overseers, while his student returned to meditating.

"No problem whatsoever from the Kyuubi, regardless of how much chakra he wastes working on these stuff. It's amazing. Although, I'm feeling kinda useless at the moment." Yamato stated honestly, knowing that he was only put on this team in case the Kyuubi got out of control. But it seems like nothing of the sort would happen.

"That's because Kyuubi and Naruto-sama had already formed a bond or an understanding a long time ago. I know that Ruri-sama facilitated some kind of meeting and an agreement was formed. I don't know what the details of the agreement are, but basically, Kyuubi does not interfere in Naruto-sama's growth or training. And when Naruto-sama is in danger, Kyuubi offers his chakra." Akiko answered straight away.

"As for his wind manipulation. He has the basics down, which is the cutting affinity of wind natured chakra. But he doesn't work well with the movement of the air. He's too much of an offensive fighter to sit still and feel the movement of air around him. He may never build a good understanding for that aspect." She continued gloomily.

"Hmm. Talking about Kyuubi's chakra, how much control does he have over the nine tails. How many tails can he manifest without losing himself to the power again?" Jiraiya asked curiously, he had known the answer but had currently forgotten (8).

Over hearing their discussion, Naruto answered himself. "3 tails." He stated firmly. "When I summon 10 percent worth of Kyuubi's chakra, my eyes turn red. 20 percent and one 'tail' forms behind my back. 30 percent and a second 'tail' forms. 40 percent, I'm running around with 3 tails. But if I go for 50 percent, that means I'm giving up half my body's chakra as Kyuubi's chaos energy, I lose myself at 4 tails."

Jiraiya and the others could only nod in understanding. Having your body moving with 50 percent demonic chakra is a lot of chaos energy.

(Back in Sound Village)

Suzumi gave a sigh of relieve when she saw the large camp of tents and other temporary shelters forming the new base of operation for the new Sound Village. Knowing her partner as well as Suzumi did, she knew that Kageru wouldn't have wanted an underground village. The existing underground chambers that once housed Orochimaru's

prisons and experiments would have been converted to simple storage units and or escape passages, not the main village itself. Behind her, she could hear and feel the slight excitement and hesitation from the ex-convicts she and Karin had brought with them from the Southern base.

It took a while for them to arrange for a large enough transport for all the ex-prisoners. In fact, they needed two large boats to fit the large number of people. That may have wasted several days of travelling time but at least now they're here.

"Suzumi-sama! Suzumi-sama!" She blinked at the calling, having never been acknowledged with a 'sama' before. "Kageru-sama has been awaiting your return. Please follow me to the commander's tent." The young Sound Shinobi behaved as if he were in a war camp. Suzumi simply followed in silence, leaving the annoying red-haired scientist to watch over the ex convicts.

Entering the large tent, Suzumi was surprised to see all four members of the Sound Four sitting around a small table in a civilised manner. More importantly, she was surprised at the new faded, sealing symbols resting on the foreheads of both Kimimaro and Juugo. She recognised that seal immediately. It was the same one that Uzumaki Naruto had implanted on herself and Kageru some years ago, during the final few days of the Kuunoki Chuunin Selection exam (9).

On Kimimaro's forehead, there was a dulled symbol of a circle surrounded by a right-side-up triangle, which was surrounded by another circle. This was finished off by the pale looking characters for 'Join' or 'Joining' writing inside the inner circle. Upon Juugo's forehead, there was a similar symbol but with different characters – one for 'spirit'. The Seishin Rentai Fuuin Jutsu (Spirit Joining Sealing System) was one that was used on Kageru and Suzumi some years ago, which allowed the two girls to transfer emotions across one another.

At first, Suzumi was surprised that the two had such seals drafted up for them, but after thinking about it, it was the logical choice. It would bind Kimimaro's calm and controlled nature to Juugo's practically bipolar persona. In fact, it was such a simple solution that Suzumi wondered why Kageru hadn't employed it ages ago. She knew that Kageru had spent months trying to unravel the seal that was etched onto their foreheads, studying it closely night after night, and spending hours researching how their chakra transfers their emotions across from one another through an invisible connection. Having finally mastered the sealing technique herself some years ago, Suzumi wondered why Kageru had not employed it to fix Juugo's personality disorder before.

But before she could voice her question, Kageru had already stood up to answer it. "Had I done it sooner, Orochimaru would have used it to his own advantage. I did not wish to grant him a weapon that is too easy to control. Now, with Orochimaru out of the picture now, I can fix Juugo's problem without him having to feel indebted to Orochimaru."

Suzumi understood the hidden meaning immediately. Not only did she not want to give Orochimaru any advantage in controlling Juugo's other half, but by doing this now, she gained a strong ally and follower. Juugo would of course feel indebted to Kageru for solving the problem with his inner beast, and as such would willingly follow her leadership. Not only that; but now that the two were linked, where Juugo follows, Kimimaro would as well, especially with Orochimaru out of the picture.

"Kimimaro and Hito will stay here to watch over the reconstruction of our new Sound Village. The plans have already been drawn up. You just need to set up the duty rosters, organise the reconstruction schedule, and train the people up. While Kimimaro and Hito stay here; Juugo, Suzumi, Karin and I will take all those that are infected by the curse seal with us to the Northern Hideout. We leave tomorrow." Leaving no room for any further question, Kageru walked calmly out the tent without a backward glance.

Suzumi signed before following her partner out through the tent flaps. */ Really, when will she ever learn to relax a little and stop giving out orders all the time. /* She muttered mentally. Behind her, she could hear Juugo hesitantly speaking with Kimmimaro. */ Poor guy. He just underwent the Spirit Joining seal. I wonder if his seal and emotions had settled down yet? It took Kageru and myself almost a week of constantly being by each other's side before our emotions stabilised. But then again, we had no idea what to expect. Kageru should have started this process some days ago (as the seal looks pretty faded already) and she probably had told them what to expect. /* Regardless of Suzumi's concerns, Kageru had already determined what to do and there was nothing that could stop her.

And so, she quickly went and told Karin of the change of plans and helped the ex-convicts settle in their new 'temporary' residences. Sorting of the ex-prisoners with curse seals on their body began at night. There weren't many of them in the Southern base or the central base, as most of the experiments became too violent to control in the standard army and or prison camps. As such, by the time dawn came into being, they were ready to set off to their new destination.

Suffice to say, Karin wasn't at all enthusiastic about travelling to the dangerous Northern hideout where most of the human experiments on the curse seal were held. Not only that, but the Northern hideout was run by someone she absolutely detests – Suigetsu, that water gurgling kappa was annoying as hell. However, with her life on the line (considering Kageru still had a snake embedded somewhere in her body), it's not like Karin really had any say in what happens to her now.

So the three female ninjas and one male spend the next few days traversing across Rice country towards Orochimaru's Northern hideout, with a trail of only 5 ex-prisoners following behind them. Although the journey wasn't completely quiet (Karin complained all

the way there), it was relatively uneventful in that nothing really impeded their progress.

Eventually (sooner than Karin had liked), they reached their destination. Upon forcing themselves through the heavily fortified doorway, they found themselves facing a single Shinobi with a large head cleaving sword strapped to his back leaning nonchalantly against a wall. The white haired teen grinned toothily at the arrivals. "Heh. You guys sure took your sweet time. Even the other guests have arrived before you."

"Shut your trap, Suigetsu." Straightening her glasses, Karin glared heatedly at the white haired teen. "It's not like I want to be here!" She snapped childishly. "And anyway, why the hell are you alone? Where are the other guards?"

Completely ignoring Karin, Kageru interrupted with her own enquiries. "So the others have arrived I take it. They got here earlier than I expected." Glancing at Suigetsu with her full attention, she continued with an underlining of threat. "You did treat them with your full respect right, Suigetsu?"

"Yeah yeah, bowed and smiled just like you asked." Waving her concerns away, Suigetsu started leading the way towards the room where the rest of the 'guests' were. "You know, when you sent that messenger bird here telling me to expect certain 'guests' from another village to come along, and that I should let them stay, I thought you were nuts." Giving a shrug of nonchalance, he babbled on. "But then 2 days ago, lo and behold, I get three Jounins from the freaking, and not to mention 'defunct' Hidden Snow village on my doorstep asking to meet with you. You know, this place ain't your normal pub for social gatherings. Why here? And what the fuck kinda deal do you have with them anyway?" Suigetsu asked as he opened a side door that lead them into a long corridor.

"That is my business, Suigetsu." Kageru replied icily.

Suigetsu looked at her with mild annoyance. "Che!" He then shrugged his irritation away. "Look, I only let them in to return the debt I owe you for releasing me when I was still stuck in that glass tube all those years ago. I ain't doing nothing else for you. So, do what you came to do and get the hell out of my hair." Suigetsu snapped back with a tinge of threat.

Kageru smiled cunningly at the albino boy as she walked pass him towards to main door. "On the contrary, I think you would be very interested in getting your hands on one of the swords held by the ex-7 Swordsman of the Mist – a certain Hoshigaki Kisame."

An eyebrow rose in interest, Suigetsu turned around to look at Kageru's back. "Oh, and what info do you have on that man?" He gripped his own sword, the legendary Kubikiri Honcho – the head hunter cleaver that once belonged to Zabuzza. It had been retrieved by Kageru some months ago and given to him as a small gift, obviously to bribe his favour in due time.

Without hesitation, Kageru gave him the information he was after, knowing full well that he had been hooked the moment she mentioned the name of a former Swordsman of the Mist. "I know he's currently a member of the Akatsuki. He was last seen a few years ago at the Kuunoki Chuunin Exam. He killed a Mist genin then and caused grave injuries to another. However, the only people to really have much information on Akatsuki are Jiraiya of the Sannin and possibly, Uzumaki Naruto. As such, we will go to Konoha at a later date, not only to show them that we are of no threat to them, but to offer them our assistance against the common threat of Akatsuki."

"Uh! What!" Karin hesitatingly pressed her glasses up her nose further. "You never mentioned anything about going against the Akatsuki! What the hell are you thinking! We can't go against the fucking Akatsuki! I want no part in this!" She screeched in a panicked voice.

"Shut the fuck up, Karin! No one cares what you think or want anyway." Suigetsu snapped in irritation, completely ignoring the resulting curses thrown his way. Turning his attention back to Kageru, whom had now reached the main door of the lounge and opened it widely for the others to follow. He sent his last question to the new though self-proclaimed leader of Oto. "Why the hell do you hate Akatsuki so much?" He inquired curiously.

Kageru paused in mid-step. "My reasoning is simply because Orochimaru was once a member of Akatsuki. I hate everything that *that* man had a hand in. Any thing he supports I will oppose. Simple as that."

"Yo." A young man wearing the forehead protector displaying the recently defunct Hidden Snow village waved in a lazy manner. He was tall and lanky with long reddish-brown hair that framed both sides of his face in delicate strands and tied back in a short pony tail. Among his cheek bones were tiny freckles littered across his skin, but that only highlights his misty green eyes even more. The young man wore a loose three quarter sleeve shirt with a puffed up collar, his loose baggy pants were slightly hidden under two long coat like tails that covered the left and right side of his hips.

Although looking very different from his younger self, Suzumi still instantly recognised the man as Naja Daiku (10), a former Snow Ninja who also participated in the joint Kuunoki Chuunin Exams. He was the ice specialist who had the special ability of controlling temperature, able to manifest ice around any parts of the human body that he contacts. Sure he was taller, his hair longer, his build wider, and showing that he had definitely matured into a man; but it was the unmistakable freckles and his cheerful eyes that made Daiku unmistakable.

Sitting delicately behind him was his diminutive teammate and partner, Gojou Hikon. Now, Kageru and Suzumi knew more about the petite girl than they did the two males of this particular team. Gojou Hikon had showed her disgust and hate towards Sound Ninjas

the moment she had stepped foot into the Kuunoki village after learning that Sound had sent their own contingent of Ninja to compete. But then again, Suzumi couldn't really blame the girl.

It was Orochimaru who took advantage of the two sisters taking refuge in Rice country, kidnapping Hikon's elder sister and brainwashed her to the point where she didn't even remember she had any living relative alive. Suzumi shuddered once more as she remembered that this ice queen Hikon was actually the younger sister of their own sarcasm queen Gojou Hito (11).

Lastly, lying on a couch beside Hikon was the last member of the Snow team – Yuse Samure. Out of the three, Samure had possibly changed the most. The teen had grown really tall, lanky and a beard. His curly brown hair had grown even longer, now only held back by a low pony tail. The young man was lying fully on the couch on his back, with dark sun-glasses covering his eyes, he looked as if he had slept the whole time and with no disturbances. What disturbed Suzumi the most though was his fake, metallic right leg attached from the knee down. */ He must have lost it in a battle or something. /*

Seeking Suzumi's pitying eyes, Hito immediately shot at her train of thought. "Samure lost his leg protecting the Princess of Spring Country. For that bravery, he was awarded with hundreds of thousands of credit to build himself a new artificial leg. We don't need your pity. He actually wears it as a sign of pride."

"Gomen." Suzumi muttered quietly in apology, not meaning to insult the three shinobi.

Well, she hadn't meant to add insult to injury, but that did nothing to stop Karin from interfering. "Who the fuck are they? Some homeless bums you collected off the streets?" She insulted rather blatantly.

Without even a single hand sign, Kageru activated her curse snake mentally, and Karin dropped to the floor in pain. The rest of the guests, Kageru, Suzumi, Suigetsu and even Jugo watched in

silence, all in agreement that she deserved that little punishment for being so rude.

However, Karin's scream of pain brought Samure out of his nap. Yawning loudly and rubbing his eyes to clear away the sleep, he looked upon Kageru with welcomed eyes. "Hey. We thought you'd never get here. So is the agreement still in place."

Releasing Karin from her pain, Kageru shifted her full attention to Samure. "Yes, the agreement still stands. If you help me with this mission. I will grant you the power and authority to gather the scattered remnants of the Hidden Snow village ninjas and set up your own region within the Sound territory. In name, you report to me, but in actuality, I will let you lead your own clan of ninjas. In return, you will help me get rid of the curse seal of Orochimaru." She stated firmly, finally revealing her reasons for approaching the Snow ninjas.

Samure nodded in agreement, before asking. "Do you have the components that we agreed upon. You know I can't just crack a seal without studying it. From what I've heard of the curse seal. It combines Ninjutsu, Fuuinjutsu and Medical based techniques. I'm not much of a medical ninja." He admitted quite openly.

"That is where Karin comes in." Kageru indicated the red haired girl still slumped against the floor. "She is one of Orochimaru's more senior assistants in the lab. She will give you all the information you need on the medical side of things. I've also attained a copy of the San Hoshi Fuuin Jutsu (3 star sealing technique) from a chance meeting with Uzumaki Naruto. He gives us his permission to use the seal in order to save lives."

Samure's eyes widened at those words. "The three star sealing system? Do you have any idea what you have in your hot little hands?" His small grin became manic in excitement.

Kageru returned a demure smile. "I have the key to the world's greatest 'healing' seal design ever created. The one specifically

created to bring life and sanity back to a Uzumaki who is on the brink of death and insanity from overuse of the Tenkun no buki."

(Fire Nation Capital)

Leaving Naruto to continue his training in wind manipulation as well as merging said chakra nature with Rasengan, Jiraiya made his way to the other side of the training ground. Once he had hidden himself well behind several bushes, he bit his thumb to draw blood and started performing the Kuchiyose no Jutsu. Slamming his palm onto the ground, the familiar summoning scripts appeared before smoke erupted from beneath his hands. He stood up straight and was at his most respectful manner when he addressed one of the two toads he had summoned into this plan.

"Damn it, boy! Why do you only call on us when you're in the middle of some wild rampage? Eh... you not in trouble? What the hell? Why aren't you in trouble?" A small, elderly looking frog like creature snapped at Jiraiya in irritation. The frog looked female with her curly purple hair in hair curlers atop her head.

"Ah. Don't say that, Ma. I'm sure Jiraiya-chan has his reasons. And it's not like he always calls on us when he's in trouble. Just look around, obviously there's no enemy currently on site." Another elderly looking frog tried to calm the first frog down. This time, he looked male with a small beard and goatee on his face.

Jiraiya bowed formally before the two toad-like creatures. "I'm sorry to call you so suddenly when it's been so long. My most honoured boss."

Waving the formality away, the elder male frog intervened. "It's all under the waters now, Jiraiya-chan. So, what brings you to call on us once more? Are you in trouble or anything?"

Taking a deep breath, Jiraiya explained the situation. "It's about my pupil, Uzumaki Naruto."

"A Uzumaki?" The female toad interrupted. "It's been a long time since I last heard or seen a Uzumaki? Last I heard, they were still isolating themselves on top of that mountain. What? How did you gain their trust to take one of their own as a pupil?"

"I apologise for withholding this information from you and the great sage. I have taken Naruto-kun as my pupil for a great many years. He is Minato's son, and my god-son. I took up responsibility as his primary carer when he was six years old. However, due to the years of neglect and torment of living alone, he had suffered psychologically and carried with him some mental and emotional trauma, I could not heal him of this trauma." Jiraiya replied honestly, thinking about those early years with Naruto in sadness. "I brought him to the Kuunoki village and had his Aunt – an Uzumaki Ruri look after him for a bit. He returned to Konoha at the age of 12 to become a genin and had slowly grown into a young man." Here, Jiraiya smiled a bit, proud at how his little pupil had grown and matured throughout the years. "He gained the Chuunin rank in his first participation of the Chunnin examination. He has been instrumental in protecting Konoha from 2 invasions from Orochimaru, negotiated a settlement of sorts between the Hyuuga clan and the Dokudes clan, and lead his people in the Kuunoki wisely and responsibly. However, due to the emergence of Akatsuki, a group of 9 S-class Nukenin, bent on the capturing of all Bijuu and Jinchuriki, Naruto is now in great danger.(12)"

"I have recently heard from my spy network that 5 out of the 9 Bijus are now in Akatsuki's hands. It won't be long before they come to hunt down Naruto as the carrier of the Kyuubi no Kitsune." Here, Jiraiya bowed lowly again. "I humbly ask for both your consent in teaching Naruto the Toad-sage arts, as well as bringing him to Mount Myouboku to train."

"Hm. That boy must carry a heavy burden on his shoulders." The female frog commented. "No matter, I do not see any problems of accepting him as a disciple of the toad arts, if you believe he has the

potential of becoming a sage." She decided before looking at her fellow toad, waiting for his response.

The male toad rubbed his chin a bit. "If he is named 'Uzumaki' Naruto, I take it then his mother is an Uzumaki. May I ask if he is Breed House or Prophet House?" He asked tentatively, having known of the interesting structure that the Uzumaki clan falls under.

Jiraiya relaxed a bit, knowing that he had at least one of the toad leader's support is enough. "Neither." He stated firmly. "Naruto was board outside of the Kuunoki. When he returned to Kuunoki, he was given the choice of either joining the Breed house or the Prophet house. He joined the Prophet house in order to gain access to the high level techniques and abilities granted to those born under the prophet house. However, just recently, the Kuunoki village have disbanded. There is no longer a Uzumaki clan, or a clan structure any more. There is no longer a difference between breed house or prophet house. Naruto is free." Jiraiya continued with a happy disposition. Although he never showed it to Naruto, he had been very worried for his pupil when Naruto first decided to join Ruri in being a member of the Prophet house. He had actually wanted the boy to remain in the Breed house, like his mother. Never the less, everything turned out okay, and he had an inkling feeling that this was what Ruri had been planning all along when she first betrayed her people.

"Hmm... There have been many changes I see." The male frog blinked in surprise. "If that is the case, I have no problems accepting the boy as a follower of our arts. Jiraiya-chan, introduce us to the boy." The frog ordered, and Jiraiya happily carried the two elder frogs towards where his pupil was currently training. "And tell me, where are you at with training the boy."

Jiraiya spent the short journey explaining all the things he had taught Naruto over the years as well as some of the interesting techniques the boy had learnt from the Kuunoki side of his family.

Naruto broke out of his meditation when he heard his name being called. He looked up to see Jiraiya walking towards him with two strange toads on the man's shoulder. Standing up, he greeted his sensei.

"Naruto. These 2 are the great head hermits of Myouboku Mountain. Fukasaku-sama on the right, and Shima-sama on the left. They taught me everything I know about Hermit-style ninjutsu." Jiraiya stated proudly.

Blinking in surprise, Naruto could only bow in recognition and respect. "It's an honour to meet you. Fukasaku-sama. Shima-sama"

"So boy, Jiraiya-chan here has told us of your adventures, and he has asked us if we would teach you the Toad sage arts, the same way we had taught Jiraiya-chan. We agreed." Fukasaku started the conversation and Naruto slowly relaxed, understanding that they were going to reject him or anything.

"But first, we want to you what you understand about Sage technique. I understand you're currently learning wind natured chakra manipulation as well as a whole host of other things, but what do you know about sage art?" Shima continued, wondering if the boy is as intelligent as Jiraiya had boasted.

Naruto frowned a bit before trying his best to explain. "To become a sage is to become one with nature. Whether it be one with the basic elements that make up nature like the wind as Akiko favours, or one with the animals and living things that live in nature. The way to make oneself 'one with nature' is to align one's chakra with the energy of nature. Sensing it, recognising it and drawing it into one's body. By making nature's energy part of one's body, we become able to use said energy on top of our own, or even in synchronisation with our own chakra. And once you're able to manipulate nature's energy, you can use it internally to make your body stronger and faster, or use it externally the way Akiko can summon her wind. But regardless of what effect you're working on, one thing stays the same. You must not 'move' when gathering nature's energy into oneself. That's the

gist of what I know." The boy shrugged, hoping he had the concept correct.

Fukusaku and Shima glanced at one another before giving a 'look' at Jiraiya which perturbed the older man. "What?" Jiraiya snapped in annoyance.

"How we wish you could have understood that theory when we first started teaching you. It would have saved us months of headache. Why couldn't you have been as smart as your student here?" Shima complained, muttering about all the trouble she went through during the times training Jiraiya.

"Hey!" Jiraiya snapped in irritation. "I didn't have a strong, charismatic sensei to guide me through the theory prior to me learning the toad arts. You guys just started throwing mud at me and hitting me with a stick! I didn't have a valiant example to follow in my youth."

At this statement, Naruto snorted before replying back. "I learnt all of that from Akiko, not you, Ero-sennin."

"Oi! What did I say about calling your respectful sensei that awful name?" Jiraiya retorted vehemently, while both Shima and Fukusaku laughed.

"Ero-sennin, eh? Hah, that's a perfect name for you, Jiraiya-chan." Shima chorted at her once-pupil, while Jiraiya grumbled about ungrateful students and how he was gonna pay the brat back.

"We like you, Naruto-chan. Continue on with your training with wind natured chakra, once you have succeeded, you can contact us by summoning any one of the toads. Once that's done, we'll come for you to take you to Mount Myouboku to train in the toad arts. We look forward to having you join us." Fukusaku complimented and Naruto smiled as he nodded in understanding.

(Sound village – Northern base)

"Kageru. I think I've been more than patient with you and all your plans. Tell me what the hell is going on. How did you get that scroll and what can this seal do? I thought only the blood of a Uzumaki can activate the Star sealing systems?" Suzumi enquired as Kageru and Samure immediately got to work. They opened the scroll in the middle of a large, empty chamber. Standing on the far side of the room stood Jugo, Suigetsu, Karin, Daiku and Hikon. All of them curious as to the complexity of this seal to make both Kageru and Samure so excited.

Once the scroll was opened to its full length, the seal was revealed drawn at its centre. The seal had three rings, each ring centred inside the other, with three star seals placed within each ring. Inside the centre ring, there is a host of words and characters that belied what the seal will affect: 'Heart', 'Balance', 'Brain', 'Memories', 'Soul', 'Motion', 'Body', and 'Emotion'.

"This is not a healing seal." Kageru's comments confused the rest of the audience, with the exception being Samure (who was still grinning madly with glee at the chance to activate such a seal). "It's a time **reversal** seal. It will pick the one moment in a person's life when they are at their most healthiest – most possibly the time prior to them gaining the curse seal, and it will convert their entire body back to what it used to be. This seal can only be used once in a person's entire lifetime, and when activated, it is incredibly painful. It will convert their entire chakra circulatory system, all their microscopic cells back to what it originally was prior to it being corrupted. Depending on how much damage there is, the change process can take up between one full day to an entire week. This seal is one of the best-kept secrets in the entire Uzumaki family library."

"A time reversal seal?" The concept boggled Suzumi's mind. Something like this could very well bring someone who's on the brink of death back to their healthiest days in youth. "Why wasn't this seal

used more often? It could save a lot of lives, both in and outside the Kuunoki." She asked curiously.

This time, it was Samure who answered. "It was forbidden by the Seven High Councillors once they were established. This seal is known as the San Hoshi Fuiin Jutsu, it is part of the 5 Star Sealing arrays that were created long ago to combat the demons that ruled this land. As you well know, people in those days had to use the Tenkun no buki in order to defeat the demons. However, using the Tenkun no buki drove them to madness or death. To preserve life, the people in that time developed this seal in order to save their families. However, there was a side-effect as is with all things. It can only be used once in the life of the victim whose lifespan is being reversed, and it can only be used once by the person activating it as well. Why? This is because it is an exchange of life."

Suzumi's eyes widened at the implications, and her face paled dramatically.

"In the past, the people who activated the seals are sacrificing their own life span, cutting their own lives short by preserving someone else's. That has always been the law of conservation, an equivalent trade if you will. However, once the seal is used, and the victim returns to full health, that does not mean they are immortal. They will still grow old and can be killed." Kageru explained the rest, even while she stood back, contemplating whether she should start activating the seal or wait until the other preparations are done.

As if reading her mind, Samure put her at ease with his next comment. "Activating it now will not harm us, it will stay in status until we have everything else ready. I think it would be a good idea to start as soon as possible."

Nodding at his comment, Kageru pulled out a kunai and slashed across the palm of her hand and purposely dropped multiple droplets of her blood onto the seal in the scroll. Instantly, the seal reacted. It glowed brightly with multiple colours before pulling itself out of the

flat scroll forming a three-dimensional sphere-like sealing array into the air (13).

Nodding as she watched the progress of the seal stabilising after he formed itself into a perform 3 metre by 3 metre sphere. Kageru analysed the seal, trying to work out what else is needed in order to make it work. Again, it was Samure, the resident seal expert that came to her aid.

"See those three circles on the ground." Samure indicated, bringing Kageru's attention to the three small hovering circles on three sides of the sealing sphere creating a triangle around the main seal. "I think they are the supporters, feeding chakra into the main seal. From the looks of them, the one on the corner there supplies the chakra – which means that whoever stands there must have a large amount of chakra. The one over here is a control seal, so whoever stands there must have pretty good chakra control. And the last one is a balance seal, connecting the two together to balance the whole system. It's fascinating." Samure felt like a little kid in a candy store. This a dream come true.

Kageru was about to move when she felt a tug on her sleeve. Turning around, she was surprised to see Suzumi near tears. "I don't want you to die." Suzumi whispered; her eyes uncharacteristically wide with hesitation and fear.

Kageru blinked in surprise. "I'm not going to use the seal the original way it was intended to be used." She stated calmly.

Suzumi and the other spectators blinked in surprise.

"Huh?" Suigetsu couldn't help but be confused. "Wait, if you're not going to use it the way it was 'intended' to be used, then how are you going to use it in the first place?"

"That's what I'm here for!" Samure called out cheerfully. "I'm a sealing expert; my job is to see what I can do to augment this seal. We don't want to reverse the effects so much that every single

person we pull into this seal becomes young and strong again. We just want to get rid of the curse seal. So I'm gonna find a way to reverse it in such a way that the curse seal disappears, but everything else remains the same. This means that the San-Hoshi seal will need less chakra to do its job, and it won't take the life of the summoner. At the same time, I can probably incorporate a 'chakra-sharing' system on top of this seal, meaning that several people can provide chakra at the same time, resulting in no one dying for the effort. It'll take me a few days but I should be able to do it." The words he spoke calmed Suzumi down dramatically.

Turning his attention back to Kageru, Samure continued. "Although this means that we will need more people. And preferably people with a lot of chakra and or specialises in chakra control." He warned.

Kageru frowned, thinking of all the people she knew she could approach and how many of them fit Samure's criteria. She eventually sighed. "The sound army is not the best in the world. I don't have many that fit either criteria and of those, not many would be willing to do this."

Samure shrugged. "I might be able to contact my family and they will be willing to help. They're nomads now like me. With the disbanding of the Snow village, we have no home(14). Your offer to shelter us has been a light at the end of the tunnel." Kageru agreed. She looked to the others for any other offers.

Suzumi shrugged, All the people she knew of were the same as Kageru's. Karin kept strictly quiet. Suigetsu shrugged, indicating he didn't know anyone other than prisoners that is. Hito shook her head, having no family except her sister who is still did not remember her existence. Daiku shrugged and apologised. "Sorry. All my family members moved back to the Mist village after the civil war. They're not interested in keeping ties with the other Snow village inhabitants. But I don't mind helping. I'm pretty good at chakra control and I have a large capacity to work with too." He volunteered.

Kageru frowned again, knowing that she needed a hell of a lot more volunteers or at least individuals with a lot of power. Her musings were once again interrupted by Samure. "Why don't contact Konoha?"

Seeing her lifted eyebrow, he explained. "Konoha is arguably the strongest shinobi village in the world at this moment. Orochimaru was their traitor, I think they would be very interested in studying what he has been up to all this time. And if you approach them as an ally, I think they would accept you. The other good thing about asking Konoha is that all the previous Kuunoki gate guardians are there. They can vouch for us at least. And if we're able to get some of the Kuunoki gate guardians here to help us, we could solve all our problems in one go."

Kageru took a deep breath, held it, then let it go. "Okay, I'll contact Konoha." She stated.

Asuma shuffled silently as he walked across a deserted hallway in the Hokage Tower in the middle of the night. Now, many people would find this action suspicious but Asuma just considered it another nightly stroll for him, a routine that he had developed since childhood.

He knew the Hokage Tower inside and out, like the back of his hand. Growing up having a father as Hokage, Asuma had spent numerous amount of time playing hide and seek in all the storage rooms, record rooms and meeting rooms. It was here where he had his fondest childhood memories, and most painful adult memories.

Sighing slightly, he stopped in his motion and leaned against the wall for a break. He had reconciled with his father slightly when he returned from being one of the 12 Ninja Guardsman working in the Fire Nation Daimyo's court. However, nothing could have prepared him to witness his own father's death at the hands of a favoured student. Although he never spoke it, Asuma had been very jealous of Orochimaru. The Snake Sannin had always been his father's

favourite pupil, he had always had Sarutobi's attention while the man neglected his own flesh and blood in the way a busy leader could not be home to witness his children's birthdays. Often times, Asuma felt overshadowed by Orochimaru's brilliance and tactical mind, and he detested the Snake Sannin even more for that, than the man's actual betrayal. When his father died, Asuma felt numb. All his irritation and long held grudge against his father faded with the man's death. All that remained was a suppressed fury and hate for the once-beloved student who turned the greatest of traitors in the history of Konoha.

Now, the situation had changed again. Orochimaru was dead. And with his death, Asuma had nothing to hold on to from his past.

Asuma was about to give off another sigh of tiredness when he held a 'squeak' somewhere down the hall. */ Strange. Anbu usually guards the outside, and I know for a fact that no one is suppose to be in the Hokage Tower at this time.* / He thought to himself as he pulled out one of his trusty knives in preparation. Silently, he moved towards the sound and found it originating from the secret scroll room, where many of Konoha's most deadly techniques were stored.

Opening the door slightly, Asuma watched and held his breath. Inside the room, he could see a local chuunin by the name of Mizuki searching through the treasure trove of scrolls, confiscating any that seemed to interest the white haired man.

To be continued...

Yes, I'm evil to leave a cliff hanger here after almost 2 years of leaving this story idle. I've finally figured what the hell I'll do with Mizuki and hopefully will have this resolved in the next chapter. Hope you enjoyed this chapter.

(1) In my story, Asuma is not dead. I hated having Kurenai's child grow up without a father, so I made it this way.

(2) This is in reference to the Second Naruto Shippuuden Movie – Bonds. Kageru stopped the Sora Ninjas early, and so the invasion never happened, and so the Konoha gang never had to get involved in counter-attacking the Sora ninjas. I also put Kageru in Sasuke's role, having her attack and kill the old Doctor after taking the scroll from him.

(3) Koushiro and Hikari Raitei (former gate guardians of the Kuunoki village) are descendants of Kumo ninjas. To find out more, read their character profiles on my website.

(4) Other members of the Kuunoki Gate Guardians.

(5) Akai Ju (or Hong Zhu is Chinese) directly translate to Red Pearl.

(6) The city is based off on the city of Ba Sing Sei from Avatar, the last airbender cartoon. Only I added 5 rings instead of 3, and they are shaped like squares. And instead of 'green' being the primary colour, it's actually red.

(7) Please read Kazeha Akiko's character profile. Kazeha-ojisan is the old man who picked up Akiko as a child and adopted her into his family. He is the original wind master.

(8) This was already mentioned in Chapter 6 of Trials of Faith , but I'm just repeating it.

(9) Restoration of Faith Chapter 34, As punishment for Kageru's participation in causing some property damage in the Kuunoki, Naruto use the Reishin Rentai Fuuin Jutsu (Spirit Joining Seal) to link both Kageru and Suzumi together emotionally.

(10) Please read Naja Daiku's profile to re-familiarise yourself with his character. I've also added a new picture of what he looks like as a 19 year old young man.

(11) Please read Gojou Hikon and or Gojou Hito's character profile in order to learn more about their relationship with one another as well

as Orochimaru's involvement in the whole thing. I'm not going to go in dept into their lives as they are only side characters. Links are on my profile page.

(12) Brief glimpse of the entire series starting from Faith in Humanity

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(13) Similar to the Naruto Shippuden anime – Guren and the Sanbi series – where the seal became three dimensional in an attempt to seal away the Sanbi.

(14) Basically, in this story, once Princess Yukei became leader of the Snow country, which was later renamed 'Spring country'. She slowly disbanded the shinobis that once worked for her. Those that remained became her city guards and palace guards. But most professional shinobi were paid their dues and left the country as nomads. They do not wish to live the life of a boring guard. Samure's family is one of the roaming clans.

Scenes IV

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 8: Scenes IV

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** ", / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: Hope all of you have had a very Merry Christmas! I really wanted to put this up before the new year and I just managed to do it too. Some swearing, but other than, no other warning, just keep on reading.

Chapter 8

(Previously on Chapter 7)

Opening the door slightly, Asuma watched and held his breath. Inside the room, he could see a local chuunin by the name of Mizuki searching through the treasure trove of scrolls, confiscating any that seemed to interest the white haired man.

Mizuki heard a noise, and instinctively, he withdrew a large shuriken from his back and threw it towards where he thought the noise originated. He turned swiftly, just in time to see the injured jounin, Asuma dodge his shuriken, leaving the door ajar and exposing the

jounin's presence. Even injured, Mizuki knew his chances of winning are slim against the Sarutobi. As such, that only help escape as his only viable option. Grabbing onto his prize, he immediately jumped out the window, smashing it to pieces on his way out. Landing lightly on his feet on the nearby building's roof top, he raced away as fast as his chakra enhanced legs to get him. Mentally, he cursed the world and every god in existence at the bad luck he's been facing lately. For so many years, he had a been a loyal spy for Orochimaru, gaining small doses of information and jutsu scrolls as payment for his service. Yes, he was envious of the Kabuto boy, who had somehow managed to worm his way into Orochimaru's side, becoming the Snake Sannin's right hand man, while Mizuke was still a lowly follower. But none the less, the Chuunin spy was handsomely rewarded with illegal monies and ninjutsu techniques. That all changed when Orochimaru died suddenly.

Now, he had no one to support him from the shadows and staying a lowly Chuunin of Konoha was by no means what Mizuki wants to spend the rest of his life doing. No, the world was wide and he had bigger and better fish to fry. So why not cut all ties, steal the scroll of forbidden techniques and make a name for himself. Mizuki, the legendary ninja – it has a ring to it in Mizuki's ears.

Blinking, Mizuki found himself already near the outskirts of Konoha in his mad rush to escape. */ Freedom! Yes, soon I'll be free. /* Mizuki thought to himself, and couldn't help but grin proudly.

However, his thoughts were cut short when suddenly a golden ring flickered into existence right in front him. It rotated on its own horizontal axis and slowly grew in size until its diameter was longer than the average height of a person. The ring stopped rotating and from it emerged a hand, an arm, and the rest of Jubei's body. The boy, though on the crust of manhood, glared darkly Mizuki.

Before the traitor could even gulp in fear, move his arm to retrieve another of his large shurikens on his back, Jubei had already summoned forth more of his rings to surround the spy. The rings quickly and effectively wrapped themselves around Mizuki's wrists

and ankles, regardless of how he tried to avoid them. Once they caught the traitor, he was immediately incapacitated, dropping to the ground like a sack of potato.

Landing lightly next to the caught traitor, Jubei lifted the precious scroll of forbidden techniques. Looking down at Mizuki, he gave a sardonic smirk. "Ibiki-san is going to have fun breaking you, I'm sure. And after he's done, I'm sure Dokudes Reiko-sama has some wonderful plans for your body."

Mizuki whimpered.

"Ibiki, report!" Rubbing her face, Tsunade signed. It's simply way too early for this mess, and she was so looking forward to having just one day of smooth sailing. Ah well, just that's just a dream.

Standing straight and looking intimidating, Ibiki gave his report as the head of the interrogation and torture unit. "Mizuki, Chuunin of Konoha, was found in the hidden vault of forbidden scrolls in the Hokage tower at 0100 hours yesterday night by Jounin Sarutobi Asuma. He was pursued and eventually captured at 0115 hours and brought directly to T&I for questioning. After 3 hours of questioning, he broke and told us all he knew."

"Turns out Mizuki has been working for Orochimaru for approximately 12 to 14 years. They came into contact when Mizuki discovered one of Orochimaru's less than stellar experiments. Instead of killing him as a witness, Orochimaru offered Mizuki the chance to join his ranks, and was given secret monetary fund's and jutsu scrolls for his service. In that time, Mizuki had passed on all the information about the up and coming Genin's and their abilities, any information discussed during Shinobi conferences, as well as any security upgrades that he had been privy too. This was one of the reasons why Orochimaru found it so easy to attack us not just once during the Chuunin Exams, but a second attempt 2 and a half years ago, which almost succeeded if it wasn't the interference by the

Kuunoki Ninjas." The large man continued, only fuelling the fire in the Godaime's eyes.

"Upon hearing of Orochimaru's demise, Mizuki panicked. He planned to escape with Konoha's scroll of forbidden techniques and make a name for himself outside the walls of Konoha. Other interesting information he's been able to provide us are the names of the other spies working for Orochimaru, and he had also once been contracted to be a mule of information between Orochimaru and surprise, surprise, Danzo of the Konoha council." Ibiki smirked viciously upon revealing this news, which surprised even Tsunade.

"Danzo? He's had contact with Orochimaru?" Tsunade's eyes narrowed in disgust. "That bastard..." she cursed under her breath.

"Unfortunately, Mizuki didn't know what was in the information package he passed between Orochimaru and Danzo. And he isn't even sure it was Danzo it was directed at. He made contact with an anonymous contact whose probably from one of the Root's division. But we don't have any solid proof." Ibiki bowed as he finished his report.

"What is to become of Mizuki now? Will he be publicly executed, and if so when?" Nara Shikaku, having been called in for this very important meeting, asked in a casual manner. He knew, that although Konoha was one of the strongest Shinobi villages in the world, it could not survive a civil war within it's own walls, it would destroy the village. As such, it is best to nip all such internal problems as soon as possible.

"No, Mizuki's body is to be given to Dokudes Reiko-sama. She has a use for it." Jubei piped up from the corner of the room.

"It? Not him?" Shikaku asked for clarification at the use of the term.

Jubei smiled sardonically. "Yes, it. We just want the body, the soul. We'll give Mizuki's soul to the Oniyobu clan, they can feed it to ghosts of hell, where traitors soul belongs."

"Right." Bringing her hands together in front of her face, Tsunade refocused on the important issue at hand. "Mizuki isn't a problem anymore. Danzo is. And I don't like the fact that he has one of his Root cronies hanging around my teams. I'm gonna send team Kakasuki, with Sasuke, Sakura and the possible spy – Sai, out of the village for the time being. Once they're gone, then I can concentrate on Danzo and getting rid of his roots division once and for all."

"How will you do that, Godaime-sama? What mission would be important enough to get those guys out of the village for a long while?" Again, it was Shikaku who asked the question.

"Simple, they will be the team send to help Taki (Hidden Waterfall Village) protect the Nanabi Jinchuriki (Seven Tail demon beast holder). They're definitely qualified considering they successfully retrieved Gaara back from Akatsuki's clutches." Tsunade answered.

"If you don't mind, Tsunade-sama." Jubei interrupted with a suggestion of his own. "How about I send Katana out with as a support member of the team?"

"Can you afford to send Katana with them? I know you're rapidly running out of available people, with Koushiro and Hikari (1) in Kumo negotiating the protection of the Hachibi; Akiko (2) in the fire nation capital with Naruto; Mishizu, Yami and Tori (3) going around spreading the word on Akatsuki; there's not that many members of the Gate Guardians left." Tsunade asked in concern.

"You don't have to worry about us. We want to do our own active parts to end Akatsuki as much as possible, and protecting the Jinchuriki's are part of the job." Jubei answered confidently. "And anyway, I've still got Seiko and Maya on site, and Mishizu, Yami and Tori will be returning to Konoha soon now that they've completed their missions."

"Hmm. That's good. Now, I just need to break the news to Jiraiya and ask him to return to Konoha." Tsunade muttered half-heartedly.

"Why do you need to recall Jiraiya-sama? I thought you have him out of the village in order to protect Naruto?" Surprisingly, it was Ibiki that asked this question.

Sighing in exasperation, Tsunade answered. "It's because I don't trust anyone else to look after Konoha while I'm gone to that Five Kage council. I trust Jiraiya with my life, and I know he's the only one other than me that has the political clout to manage Konoha without Danzo and the bloody Advisors getting in the way. Not to mention, if there is anyone in the world that could spy and gather incriminating evidence on Danzo and his workings, it would be Jiraiya. He needs to stop looking out of Konoha for enemies, because the enemies inside Konoha are more dangerous to us right now. I need Jiraiya here to help me get rid of Danzo and the threat he poses."

The others nodded in agreement to her statements. After all, if you can't ensure security internally, how can you possibly be secure externally?

A lone figure walked towards the massive gates of Konoha only to be stopped by the two guards of the gate. "Halt! Who are you and state your reasons for entering Konoha." Kotetsu had repeated those words so many times that it was almost instinctively out of his mouth before he could even think. Although, considering the circumstances the young ninja that stood before him certainly looks rather suspicious.

"My name is Kageru. Sasayaki Kageru. I am the new Oto leader. I'm here to request an audience with the Hokage. I wish to discuss the terms of an alliance with Konoha." The female version of Orochimaru scared the hell out of Izumo as he gazed at her seemingly emotionless gold eyes. He gulped before replying. "Um.. Please wait as I liaise with the Hokage to see if she's free to meet with you. If she is busy, you may have to come back." He suggested as calmly as he could.

"I see, I will wait." Kageru stated before leaning against a near by tree and wait for the verdict.

Having just dealt with the fiasco of Mizuki turned traitor, Tsunade thought that was all the action she will see today. Turns out she was wrong when Izumo burst into her office, distracting her from her very important paperwork. "Tsunade-sama! A ninja claiming to be the Oto Leader – Sasayaki Kageru is currently waiting at the southern gates, awaiting permission to enter Konoha and speak to you. I have already alerted the Anbu and they are on standby. What should we do?"

Tsunade signed wearily, wondering when did those boring days of paperwork disappear to. Nowadays, she can't go a single day without something big dropping into her lap. Standing up, she gave Izumo a glare (just because she could). "Bring her in Izumo. Have the Anbu follow your progress through the village. You are to take her directly to the second welcome hall, I will be there waiting with a few ninjas I trust."

"Hai, Hokage-sama!" Saluting his leader, Izumo rushed out of the office to run his errands. Tsunade hit a button on her intercom. "Shizune! I need Jubei, Shikaku and Ibiki in the Hokage Tower 2nd welcome hall, stat!" Finished with her message, Tsunade stomped away from her table piled high with unfinished paperwork and made her way towards her destination.

Tsunade sat patiently waiting for her new guest to arrive. Behind her stood Nara Shikaku, Morino Ibiki and Dokudes Jubei. Sometimes she wondered why she kept on including Jubei on all of Konoha's most important meetings, but he had been impressively useful to her, providing insights into areas no one else in Konoha would have thought of, and as a representative and leader of the displaced Kuunoki citizens, it was imperative that she kept him in the loop as she's relying heavily on many of the Kuunoki ninjas to join her forces and provident supplementary support to her main force.

Finally, the door opened and in came a young woman with long silky black hair, pale almost white skin and sharp golden eyes. The eyes of Orochimaru. But unlike her old teammate's sinister aura, this young woman held herself in a tightly controlled manner, not dissimilar to how Naruto would himself during an important meeting or during the Kuunoki court. However, unlike Naruto who can be very open with his emotions, Kageru's face and eyes were empty, completely concealing her true intentions.

Stiffening slightly at the impassive woman, Tsunade stood and followed decorum by shaking the hands of Oto Shinobi. "I'm Senju Tsunade, Konoha Gakure no Sato's Godaime Hokage." Narrowing her eyes in thought, she continued. "I remember you I think, I was there watching you battles in the Kuunoki Chuunin Exams. To think you've now become the leader of Oto, my, how time flies. Then again, Gaara made it to Kazekage in the same amount of time." She muttered the last bit beneath her breath.

Kageru wisely ignored her comments and introduced herself in a formal manner, shaking the hand of the leader of (arguably) the most powerful ninja village in the world. "I am Sasayki Kageru, the newly instated leader of Oto. I wish to negotiate an alliance with Konoha in order to build better relationships, both in regards to Ninja resources and trade for the future of both our villages."

Tsunade introduced the rest of her entourage before they all sat down around the table and commenced the true discussions, with Shikaku leading the diplomatic front. "So, you're the leader of Oto now that Orochimaru has passed on. Tell us, what can Oto possibly provide to the table of this negotiation. I would expect that without Orochimaru, your so-called soldiers and test subjects would be scattered to the wind."

"In Oto, power is the only thing that matters. We have information, dirty secrets on all the major shinobi villages in the world. Not to mention, I have all the notes on Akatsuki from Orochimaru's times with them, including information about the leader and the whereabouts of their bases. Orochimaru and Kabuto have also done

a lot of human experiments over the years, they've come up with new sealing techniques, poisons and methods to torture and interrogate prisoners. I will share all out internal workings with Konoha in exchange for this alliance."

Ibiki narrowed his eyes before snapping forcefully. "And how do we know that you did not partake in any of the human experimentation. You could be just as bad as Orochimaru and Kabuto. What makes you so different?"

Not even flinching at the accusation, Kageru continued her comments in an emotionless manner. "When Orochimaru died, Kabuto collected his body and left Oto with some of Orochimaru's most important manuscripts. Oto's forces were fractured and disassembling before I organised them into units and gave them duties and responsibilities. I am the leader not just because I have the power to defeat all of them, but because I have the strength of will to lead them. Unlike Kabuto, who treats soldiers like insects to be used and then thrown away; I lead them as they are *my* troops. Kabuto's more interested in dead bodies, than live ones. To me, a dead body is useless. If you are implying that I am anything like Kabuto and Orochimaru, you are dead wrong. I detest them with every fibre of my being. The last thing I want is to be anything like those two monsters."

Coughing to distract the current conversation, Shikaku brought the matter back on hand. "Okay. So you can offer us information, and all the techniques that Orochimaru and Kabuto developed over the years. What do you want out of this alliance?" he questioned, curious about what this new and interesting version of Orochimaru would desire.

Closing her eyes and breathing in deeply, Kageru reopened her eyes and focussed all her attention on the Hokage. "I want Konoha's help to destroy the taint of Orochimaru's Curse Seal on all our surviving human prisoners. And if that goes well, I hope to join Konoha in the war against Akatsuki and establish Oto as an independant but allied Shinobi village in its own right."

Tsunade remained silent for a long while after before finally nodding her head in acceptance. "What do you need?" She asked. And Kageru smiled shyly in return.

By the end of the negotiations, Shizune, Kiba, Hinata, Shino, Mishizu, Yami and Tori were all dispatched to travel back with Kageru to Sound in order to help Oto re-establishment itself and to resolve the issue of the curse seal.

Naruto grits his teeth tightly as he and two other Kage Bunshin placed all their concentration into the spinning wind shuriken held delicately in between all their hands. Finally, once he believed he had stabilised the jutsu enough, the other two Kage Bunshin dispelled and he lifted the jutsu up high above his shoulders. "There." He announced full of pride. "The Rasen-Shuriken is complete," only to flinch and lose control of the Jutsu.

Shutting his eyes tightly, Naruto threw the dangerously destabilising jutsu away as far as possible and watched somewhat wide-eyed as his jutsu grew in size to expanding proportions and decimated the surrounding area of the direction he threw it at. Once the explosion of sound and wind cleared, even Naruto gulped at the destruction that his jutsu had caused.

"Wow. Naruto-sama. That's one powerful wind jutsu." Akiko whistled in awe. Standing beside her, Yamato's mouth was hanging wide open. And beside him, Jiraiya only stood with large impressed eyes.

"Although, it's too dangerous." Akiko's sudden comment brought everyone back to earth.

"Huh?" Yamato couldn't help but ask. "What do you mean?"

Gripping Naruto's hands and lifting it up for inspection, Akiko ignored Naruto's flinch of pain. "You can't see it, but Naruto-sama did irreparable damage to the inner tissues of his hands and arms. The chakra network in there has been completely shredded and I have a

sinking feeling so are his cells. This jutsu is doing just as much damage to its user as it does its victims." Focussing a strong look at her master and prince, Akiko emphasised seriously. "Naruto-sama. You must not use this jutsu until you've mastered Sage technique. The only reason I'm not rushing you back to Konoha so that you can be treated by Tsunade-sama and Ryoko-sama is because I know the Kyuubi will heal this wound. However, that does not mean you should use it. Even Kyuubi would need days, possibly weeks to heal this arm."

Again, Yamato was about to ask why is that when Jiraiya provided the explanation. "Becoming a Sage and using the external chakra around you strengthens your body, this will then stop the Rasen-Shuriken from shredding Naruto's own arm." Nodding at his student, Jiraiya put forth his own two cents. "I agree with Akiko, Naruto. You need to learn the Sennin arts first." Giving a sigh, he scratched his head. "Unfortunately, Tsunade has called me back to Konoha for some urgent news. So I will not be able to teach you. You will need to go to Mount Myouboku and learn the arts from the two masters, just as I did."

Nodding, Naruto agreed with Jiraiya, obviously understanding that if Tsunade wanted Jiraiya back in Konoha, something definitely is going on. "I understand. I'll take the rest of this week to rest and recover. And then I'll travel to Mount Myouboku to start my training with the Sage arts. You guys can then go back to Konoha and deal with whatever Tsunade's neck deep in at the moment." Seeing the worrying looks on all three faces, he tried to dissolve their fear. "Don't worry about me. Once I'm at Mount Myouboku, I'll be fine. Even Akatsuki doesn't know how to get there."

Sighing, Jiraiya could only agree. And if he agreed, there was no place for Yamato and Akiko to repute.

A week later, Naruto was reverse-summoned to Mount Myouboku, to start his new training with the two sage masters – Shiima and Fukasaku. Concurrently, Jiraiya, Yamato and Akiko left the haven of the Red City and made their way back to Konoha.

Pein watched dispassionately as the body of the once Gobi Jinchuriki fell upon the floor of the large chamber. His gaze then fell on to the remaining Akatsuki members. "And that makes 5 out of the 9 bijuus we have captured."

"Yeah, and we also lost Sasori-Danna, Hidan-baka and Kakuzu-teme." Deidara snapped rather irritably, having been forced to pretty much fight the Gobi Jinchuriki all on his own with very little support from his so-called partner in crime.

"But we gained Tobi and Ruri, ne! Deidara-sempai! Tobi is a good boy. Tobi beat big bad Jinchuriki all on Tobi's own. Tobi strong and reliable, ne?" Tobi's cheerful voice rang out.

Before Deidara can retort back with a scathing comment or two, Pein interrupted their childish squabbles. "Enough, Deidara and Ruri, you are to hunt down the Rokubi Jinchuriki. The last intel we received about him is that he had left the safety of Kirigakure and is on the run. Itachi and Kisame is to hunt down the Nanabi, who is located in Taki. If one of you finishes early, you are to help the other team. Once we have both, we will reconvene to extract their bijuu before finally hunting down the last two Jinchuriki."

"Eh? Deidara-sempai is working with Ruri-sempai? What about Tobi? Tobi's been a good boy! Tobi has. Why isn't Tobi with Deidara-sempai? Tobi's going to cry!" Tobi threw a childish tantrum and calmed somewhat when comforted by Zetsu.

Standing beside him, Deidara gave a short sigh of relief, finally having dumped the immature idiot for someone presumed far more useful. *I Thank god! If I have to put up with that idiot one more day, I'm gonna blow him up myself!* Deidara silently thought to himself.

"This is NON-NEGOTIABLE." Pein's final words silenced the room. Soon after, his distorted image disappeared, followed by the others leaving only Tobi left.

"Nagato... Are you trying to challenge me..."

It took a mere two days of travel to reach the Northern Sound base from Konoha, where Kageru had left Samure, Karin and Suzumi to work out how to best erase the taint of Orochimaru's curse seal from all the prisoners that were experimented on previously. The Konoha Ninjas following her made good time and were eager to get started, all except Kiba.

"Can we really trust her? What if she leads us to a trap?" He whispered to his teammates as they jumped from rock face to rock face.

"I've scanned her with my Byakugan many times, her body language does not show her to be the kind that would betray someone once she has given her word. She is prideful and confident, but also careful and honourable. I do not believe she will betray us. She genuinely wants an alliance with Konoha." Hinata answered back in her firm but still delicate voice. Having spent many years training herself to the bone and undergoing Tsunade's more strenuous training methods had boosted Hinata's self-confidence. Taking on an adults role to look after her younger sister had also made her mature far faster than anything else. Though still self-conscious at times and often introverted, Hinata no longer stuttered nor does she blush as often when surprised or embarrassed.

"Not to mention, she would have to take down three of the ex-Kuunoki Gate Guardians to get to us. I don't think even she is powerful enough to take down Yami-san, Mishizu-san and Tori-san." Shino interrupted logically. "The only logical explanation would be that she is honest in her appeal to Hokage-sama for an alliance."

"Well, you can do whatever you want, but until she proves herself, I'm keeping my distance. Right, Akamaru?" The giant white dog barked in agreement to his master. After all, Akamaru detested the smell of snakes that covers the lady they were following.

"Kiba-kun, I understand your misgivings. However, you must not do anything to hamper this mission. If successful, this could be the building blocks for a better relationship between the two villages in the near future. Do you really want your animosity to lead to a war between our two villages? Not to mention, the intel they are going to be providing to Konoha is invaluable." Shizune spoke up in a firm voice. As the leader of this team, she alone has authority to reprimand any of the young ninja's behaviours.

"Don't worry, Shizune-san. I won't do anything to endanger this mission or our alliance. I just don't like anything or anyone that reminds me of that monster Orochimaru." Kiba muttered under his breath.

The three ex-Kuunoki shinobi kept their silence throughout this exchange, not wanting to get involved with the argument. To them, as long as it was an order (and this time it was one issued from Jubei), then they would accomplish the mission without question. They were use to that kind of treatment, having always been loyal and never questioning the orders of Ruri-sama when she still ruled the Kuunoki.

Upon reaching their destination, Kageru wasted no time bringing them right into the building, bypassing an amused Suigetsu who languished on a couch placed directly beside the main passage way. "So you're back huh?" He grinned over his water bottle.

Jumping to his feet, he followed the new Oto leader, ignoring the rest of the pack and started giving her his report. "That Samure guy has done some awesome work with that seal you gave him. He says he has it completed now, although it did cost us about 3 sizable rooms since he was testing them in those, and when it didn't work, it blew up in his face. Luckily his two teammates seemed to be really used to bailing him out of explosive situations. Karin has Juugo's blood work and DNA analysis all ready for you to look over. She thinks she's isolated the cell or chromosome or whatever it is that activates the cure seal. And Juugo... Well, Juugo's spending his time talking with the other inmates."

"And Suzumi?" Kageru asked.

Suigetsu paused for a few seconds before answering in a quiet voice. "She left a day after you left. We received reports that Kabuto was spotted not far from here, and she went to confront him?"

Kageru's eyes narrowed. "Alone?"

Suigetsu sighed. "I did tell her not to go alone, but she wouldn't hear it, said this was a personal." He shrugged. "Then I offered to go with her, and again she shot me down. Man, why am I always the one that's not appreciated, huh?"

Stopping suddenly, Kageru turned around to meet the serious faces of the seven shinobis following her. "I apologise, but I need one of the teams here to track down my partner – Yakushi Suzumi, who is currently in pursuit of Konoha's known traitor – Yakushi Kabuto. Kabuto, as Orochimaru's right hand man, has far more knowledge of Orochimaru's inner workings than anyone else. I believe some of you specialise in tracking. I can give you Suzumi's scent, please follow her, and if you find Kabuto, capture him at all costs."

Looking at Kiba, Hinata and Shino, Shizune agreed that capturing Kabuto would be the best thing to do right now. "Kiba, Hinata and Shino. Please track down and capture the convicted traitor Yakushi Kabuto. And if you're unable to, you have permission to terminate him."

Happy about seeing some action, Kiba whole-heartedly agreed. He too, had a major grudge against that bloody traitor. It didn't take long for Kageru to find some of Suzumi's clothes, and with the scent embedded to his memory, Kiba and Akamaru immediately headed off towards where the scent is most recent, followed closely by Shino and Hinata.

That left Shizune, Mishizu, Yami and Tori with Kageru. "Let's get started then, I want to see this person who is the original carrier of the curse seal." Shizune announced knowing that time is of the

essence and it's best to get this sorted as soon as possible, so she could return to Konoha before Tsunade set off to the 5 Kage summit.

Upon first meeting Shizune, Juugo was immediately put through a battery of tests, almost the same tests that he had already gone through once with Karin, but regardless, he put up with all the poking and probing with good humour. Suffice to say, Karin and Shizune did not get along well. Although both were experts in the medical field, Karin had been exposed to Orochimaru and Kabuto's dismissive manner in dealing with 'patients/prisoners' for too long to change her attitude, which rubbed Shizune completely the wrong way. However, between the two of them, they were pretty sure they worked out how the curse seal works.

Indeed the curse seal is a fusion of Ninjutsu, poison, Genjutsu and sealing arts all wrapped up in one. Firstly, Orochimaru bites his victims and injects them with a special enzyme. This enzyme acts like a virus spreading through the victims own blood streams and cells, heating up all the areas they pass through, hence causing the victim's body to develop high fevers that result in the majority of deaths due to the sudden shock of the invading virus and the body being too weak to battle it off or adapt to it. Once the enzymes spread and starts forcing cells to mutate and remain in a dormant format, a seal is placed at the point of injection, making it almost impossible to 'eject' the enzyme out of the victim's body, as that would mean recycling all the affected cells in the body. Over the course of 2 to 3 days, the mutated cells would attach themselves to the main organs of the body, as they travel through the blood streams. Depending on which organ they attach to, they cause different affects, the most alarming being the brain.

The most spectacular ability of the mutagen cells is their ability to identify what organs they are attach to and then activate its hidden abilities to affect said organs. Genjutsu and other illusionary spells are placed in the brain to affect the victim's aggression and adrenalin glands, making the victim more prone to violence. Again, another mini ninjutsu seal is placed in the brain to allow Orochimaru control

of their bodies. Another important aspect of these mutagen cells is that they can combine together to creating something similar to an embryonic stem cell. Embryonic stem cell, being the cells that form during the conception of a child, can propagate indefinitely, and form all other kinds of cells and genes in the body. It is through this process that people who undergo the curse seal level 1 and level 2 stages are able to form strange appendages to their original bodies. And upon returning to their regular bodies after having used the curse seal level 1 or 2 stages, the cells that were generated during the transformation were destroyed, weakening the body over time and shortening the lifespan of the person. Simply put, it's a miracle that Juugo's body seem to act like a giant embryonic stem cell, constantly creating extra appendages and mutating existing ones before returning him to his normal form. (4)

Shizune and the other ex-Kuunoki guardians were extremely impressed with what Samure had done with the original sealing matrix (San-Hoshi Fuiin Jutsu) that was provided by Kageru. Instead of it being a time reversal Ninjutsu that took the life of the user, Samure had changed the seal to inject another special enzyme (to be created by Shizune and Karin) into the body that specifically targets mutagen cells and attacks them. Once the mutagen cells are all gone, which requires a large amount of chakra from a host to keep the seal active during this time; the seal then modifies its purpose and uses a set of purification seals with medical techniques in them to strengthen the remaining cells in the body to the best its ability. All the victims will never be as strong as they once were before they had the curse seal injected in them, but at least they could live healthy lives again without the seal to remind them of their term as test subjects to the ruthless Orochimaru.

Once Karin and Shizune finally developed the counter-enzyme and with Mishizu, Yami and Tori to supply the massive amount of chakra to activate and contain the seal, it wasn't long for the first person to undergo the seal. It took 2 days for the victim to be freed from the curse seal, and he was ecstatic to find out he was completely free of the seal after the process.

Upon returning to Konoha, Jiraiya made his way to the Hokage tower immediately, sneaking through the window as is his bad habit. He wasn't surprised to see Tsunade slumped over her paperwork and snoring softly. Grinning lecherously at his former teammate, he was just about to do something nefarious when Jubei suddenly immersed from a transportation ring that was nailed to the Hokage's wall permanently. Jubei coughed and Tsunade immediately woke due to the sound. Looking around, she glared at Jiraiya, somehow knowing everything was his fault.

Sighing, she sat back into her chair and stretched her neck. "So your back. Is Naruto with you."

"Nah." Jiraiya shrugged. "He's been summoned to Mount Myouboku to train with Fukusaku-sama and Shiima-sama in the sage arts. Both me and Akiko have done our bests to teach him the foundations of the technique, but he really needs the special oil at Mount Myouboku to truly learn the sage arts. So we went separate ways."

"I see. Well, Jiraiya. I have a mission for you. I want you to act in the Hokage's role while I'm away. And in the mean time, I want to focus on Danzo. We need to gather information about what he's been doing, and charge him with something that the Fire Nation court will have no choice but find him guilty and strip him of his position and power. I've had it with him and his underground organisation." Tsunade snapped fiercely.

Jiraiya frowned. "Actually, I was hoping I could get your permission to leave Konoha for a bit. I think I know where the location of the Akatsuki leader is and I want to go there to investigate it further. And with the 5 Kage summit happening at the same time, it might be the best time to go investigate as most of the world's attention will be focused there."

Tsunade narrowed her eyes at his sudden request. "And when were you going to tell me about this latest news?"

Jiraiya grinned cheekily. "I only just thought about it." Suddenly turning serious, Jiraiya answered frankly. "Anyway, I think he's in the Hidden Rain Village."

"Hidden Rain Village?" Jubei's curious voice interrupted the conversation. "Their country has extraordinarily strict border control. Anyone entering has to declare their purpose, length of stay and is subject to constant surveillance. Even the delegates from Kuunoki were treated no differently to suspicious criminals. It's not the kind of village someone in his position would be able to move around in easily."

"All the more reason for him to be there." Jiraiya stated confidently. "A place that protects its own secrets from outside countries, with strict control, is the perfect place to hide its shameful truths."

"Shameful?" Tsunade asked, not knowing what Jiraiya was referring to.

"Apparently, that country's been embroiled in a civil war for quite a while now. And rumour has it that Akatsuki's leader is in charge of one side." Jiraiya explained.

Jubei frowned behind the two Sannins. "I think you better stop thinking of the Akatsuki's leader as the one in charge of only one side, Jiraiya-san. Having seen the strange power of the Akatsuki, I can't help but believe if the leader is truly in the Hidden Rain village, then the whole village is probably in his control right now." Thinking back to the strange three members of Akatsuki that kept on speaking as if they were one entity, it was something that Jubei would not quickly forget.

"Perhaps, but that's all the more reason that I need to infiltrate the village, and see what's going on." Jiraiya stated his reasons clearly.

"By yourself? That's way too dangerous!" Tsunade suddenly snapped at the realisation of what Jiraiya planned to do.

"I'm one of Konoha's Legendary Sannin. You remember what that means, right? Impossible isn't impossible for us." Jiraiya stated confidently.

Tsunade glared at the man, knowing that he was deliberately pushing her button, forcing her to choose between the valuable Intel he could gather, or keeping him here in Konoha in her stead.

"Actually, you don't have to go at all Jiraiya-sama." Jubei's words completely took the other two Sannins by surprise.

"What do you mean? Of course I have to do. I'm one of the strongest Shinobi's in the world, and hardly anyone can claim to be a better spy than me." Jiraiya boasted firmly.

"That's not what I mean. It's not your ability as a spy and information gathering that is in question, Jiraiya-sama. It is your ability to escape Akatsuki unharmed that is in question. You probably could sneak into the Hidden Rain and gather valuable info, I won't fault you for that. But can you escape with your life? That, I'm not so sure of." Jubei reasoned seriously.

"Well, if not me than who else has a better chance of hitting Akatsuki and escaping alive?" Jiraiya retorted only to be interrupted by Jubei again.

"Kaga-san can escape into shadows. He can stay inside shadows and listen to all the rumours and conversations around him. He'll be the perfect person to send to such a mission. As long as he's not trapped in a seal, which I do not believe he's that careless, then he will be able to bring us back any information he can find." Jubei stated firmly.

Surprise could clearly be seen on both the Sannin's faces. "Kaga? Isn't he still... uh... depressed by Ruri's leaving?" Jiraiya stuttered uncertainly.

"Which is exactly why he would accept this mission, just for the chance to see her again." Breathing in deeply, Jubei closed his eyes in order to hide his sadness. "Ruri-sama's leaving hurt us all, but it tore Kaga-sensei's heart apart. Given the chance, he would willingly go through hell to get her back. If the leader of the Akatsuki is really in Hidden Rain, then there's a chance that Ruri-sama is there as well."

"I understand, but I just can't agree to sending Kaga out there alone, and especially in his current emotional state." Tsunade spoke as a medical doctor first and a Hokage second.

"He won't be going alone. I'm thinking of sending Dokudes Ryoko-sama and Kataichi Touya-san with him. Mind you, it has been awhile since Ryoko-sama did any active missions, but her skills have not dropped any over the years. With her being the support medical ninja, even if Kaga-sensei and Touya-san are hurt, she can heal them relatively easily. Touya-san should be sent because he alone is the sole member of the Kuunoki that does not rely on any Ninjutsu or Genjutsu; only simple Taijutsu. It's not dissimilar to the Chuunin, Rock Lee." Jubei continued to explain his ideas.

"How would that be helpful? He wouldn't be able to defend against Ninjutsu or Genjutsu at that rate." Jiraiya asked, curious.

Smirking sinisterly, Jubei stated with a dark gleam in his eyes. "It makes people underestimate him. And you should not doubt my choice, Jiraiya-san. Kataichi Touya is strong... He was supposed to be member of the latest set of Gate Guardians, but due to his disability of sorts, he was the one who decided not to participate. And as such, Ruri-sama gave him the role of house keeper and guard for the royal palace, simply because he alone could protect the entire compound."

"Fine." Tsunade interjected before Jiraiya could ask any more questions. "Jubei can you please organise for Kaga, Dokudes Ryoko and Kataichi Touya to go on this mission first thing tomorrow morning." Jubei nodded and Tsunade turned her attention to Jiraiya.

"And YOU!" Pointing to her teammate, she continued. "We've got lots to talk about before you can take over my role while I'm at the summit, including how we're gonna deal with Danzo."

Deidara held still the struggling girl in his arms as he flew higher into the air, leading the enraged Jinchuriki on a wild goose chase. "Ah! Stop moving around you brat, or else I'm gonna throw you off my summon!" Deidara threatened the girl once more.

"Let go of me! You vermin! Just you wait, when Uta-kata-sama catches up with us, you're going to pay for kidnapping me!" The young blond girl shouted vehemently (5).

"Che. Don't you think that's what I'm planning on? OW! You Bitch! You bit me!" Slapping the girl away, Deidara glared at the teeth marks on his wrist.

Refocussing his attention on the Rokubi Jinchuriki – Uta-kata of the Hidden Mist, Deidara sees that the young man was catching up to them, and releasing the power of the Rokubi while doing so. But turning his head and looking forward once more, Deidara saw that his partner in crime was already prepared. Deidara smirked cruelly at the girl. "Say bye bye to your precious Uta-kata, little girl." He taunted before shouting down at Ruri. "He's in place! Do it!"

Waiting patiently for the Rokubi Jinchuriki to arrive exactly where she wants him to be, Ruri quickly performed a set of seals before slamming her hands onto the ground. "Juryoku Fuuin Jutsu! (Gravity Seal!)" She shouted as a giant seal appeared on the ground. It's circular base completely entrapped the large five tentacle creature that was once the Rokubi Jinchuriki. Upon the seal's activation, the victim within the seal immediately collapsed and stayed down due to the sudden increase in pressure and gravity pulling his limbs to the earth. It didn't take long before the poisonous cloud of demonic chakra slowly faded away leaving a tired and immobile Uta-kata, helpless and vulnerable to all attacks.

Ruri walked slowly but steadily towards her prey, the seal seemingly not affect her at all. Upon reaching the young man, she placed a small paper seal on his forehead and he immediately felt drowsy. No matter how much Utakata tried to fight the forced sleep, he simply couldn't. With his last breath of energy, he muttered pleadingly: "Hotaru... Please let her go..."

Gazing somewhat sadly at him, Ruri whispered quietly. "Don't worry, she will not be hurt." Finally, Utakata knew no more, having completely lost consciousness.

"UTAKATA-SAMA!" Hotaru screamed, finally breaking out of Deidara's grip and rushing towards her sensei with all haste. "Get away from him!" She shouted with all her passion before performing a set of seals of her own. From her mouth, she released a large ball of water at Ruri. Unfortunately for Hotaru, the moment the summoned water entered the sealing area; it fell and splattered against the ground harmlessly.

"Stupid girl. That's a gravity seal, anything inside it would have the gravity ten times its normal weight, only its summoner Ruri is not affected." Deidara explained happily, watching from above how the girl screamed in outrage and fought futilely to save her beloved.

It didn't take long for Ruri to subdue the girl. All it took was a well placed Genjutsu and Hotaru was out. Eventually, Ruri released the gravity seal, allowing Deidara to land himself and his summon onto the ground. "So now, we wait for Zetsu huh?" Deidara asked, and not a moment too soon, Zetsu's head emerged from the ground.

Pulling himself out of the earth, Zetsu walked towards Utakata. "Congratulations of subduing the Robuki Jinchuriki. You should both find a place to rest up. I'll take his body to Pein-sama and the extraction should start soon once Itachi and Kisame returns with their Jinchurki." With that said, Zetsu dragged the unconscious body of the young man with him through the earth.

"Well, let's go now, Ruri-san. I bet you we're the first team to finish capturing our Jinchuriki. Heh, I can't wait to rub that into the stupid Uchiha's face." Deidara announced politely to Ruri, while thinking about posing a victory sign in front of the impassive Itachi. Strangely enough, Deidara quite respects Ruri, perhaps as not a fellow artist, but definitely a formidable Shinobi in her own right. She didn't annoy him like Itachi did, all prim and proper like, but she didn't grate on his nerves like Kakuzu and Hidan had done. In fact, other than Sasori, Deidara quite enjoyed working with Ruri. She was dedicated, quite and damn useful, he could finally understand why Pein wanted her to join Akatsuki. Even without the Tenkun no Buki's, she made it look easy to subdue the power of a Jinchuriki – the power of human sacrifices.

"You should go first, Deidara-san. I'm gonna stay back and deal with the girl." Ruri indicated the unconscious form of Hotaru.

"Okay, don't stay too long though. We don't want to be caught by any patrolling ninjas. I'll meet up with Kisame and Itachi first. You come find us whenever you're finished." Deidara stated before he had his summoned bird lift him up into the air and started flying away.

Sighing and with her shoulders slumped down in tiredness, Ruri looked at Hotaru sadly. Placing a hand on the girl's forehead, she erased all memories of her meeting with Uta-kata. Once done, she left the girl. It wouldn't be long before the girl's guardian, a ninja by the name of Tonbei, found her. Firstly, Ruri needed to make her escape.

Using shunshin no jutsu, Ruri leapt and made quite some distance before she landed on the ground and waited. "Come out. I know you're there, Uchiha Madara." Green vines suddenly shot up from the ground and wrapped tightly around Ruri's body, trapping her body and ensuring that she would not be able to perform any seals.

Finally, a swirling affect appeared in the middle of the air before a form a man slowly materialised into reality. The still masked Uchiha

Madara watched passively at the once Lady Oracle. Ruri smiled calmly. "I knew you wouldn't allow me to act for much longer."

"I don't know what Pein's plans for you are. But I do not trust you. As useful as you are, I don't want you in the Akatsuki." Madara stated firmly. "With Pein now at the main base and Itachi in the south, I finally have the opportunity to get rid of you. Take her away, Zetsu."

From beneath the ground, Zetsu's head emerged. "As you wish, Madara." Slowly, Ruri's form was swallowed into the ground, ensuring that her freedom was stripped away from her once again.

In the last week or so since Orochimaru's death, Kabuto had been busy. First, in order to preserve some part of his beloved master alive, Kabuto had incorporated Orochimaru's body into himself and by doing so, he was surprised that Orochimaru's genes were slowly starting to take over his own body. At the time, when he lost the one being who defined his existence, Kabuto had felt lost and alone in a way that he had never felt before. He needed Orochimaru to define his life and his existence; without Orochimaru, he had no purpose, no reason to exist. It was horrifying time for the young scientist, up until the point he made his first decision to surpass his old master. By embedding Orochimaru's body into his own, he now controlled what was left of Orochimaru's power and techniques. With this, Kabuto suddenly found a whole world of options opened to him. He could do anything now.

In that time, he made the conscious decision to kill the one who took away Orochimaru – Uzumaki Ruri. And he decided on the method to do so – by using the Edo Tenshi (Impure World Resurrection). Since then, he's been busy collected samples from the corpses of well known or powerful ninjas. It wasn't a glorifying job - raiding graves and cemeteries and collecting body parts, but it was all part of his plan to call forth an army of the dead. Any soldiers that were once loyal to him and immediately became his sacrifices for the technique. Although he had built a small army in which he could call upon anytime, it still wasn't enough. He needed more corpses and more

sacrifices. Now, he made his way slowly towards the Northern Hideout.

He knew Suigetsu being the guard of the place could care less what happened to the inmates, as such, they would be perfect sacrifices for his plans. Unfortunately, his plans came to an abrupt end today when he found his younger sister, Suzumi, standing in his path.

"I see. So you still follow in that monster's footsteps?" Suzumi gazed at her older brother with pitying eyes.

Kabuto glared back. "You don't know anything, Suzumi! When Orochimaru died, I lost everything that defined me, again. I've never really know who I am or where I'm from. All I have are enemies. As a kid going from one village to another acting as a spy, I never had a home. Not with mom, not with anyone. The concept of 'home' still eludes me. You don't know what it's like, Suzumi! Losing him meant losing my identity." He stated strongly.

Suzumi shouted back just as passionately and loudly. "That's a load of bull shit if I ever heard any from you, brother. Orochimaru is nothing but monster that cared for no one but himself. His obsession with immortality cost him his humanity, and he used us like we were merely pieces of meat for his amusement. He only liked you because you amuse him with your blatant loyalty. Had he not been killed, he would have used us until our usefulness ran out, and then... and then he would kill us like the trash he thinks we are!"

"All this crap about not having a home, not knowing who you are! That's all bull shit! You never had a home because you didn't want one. You don't have a family because you barely acknowledged my existence. You hated the bastard who fathered us, and you hated mom for being weak and ignorant. You hated the world and your own insignificant existence. But instead of striking out and making a name for yourself, you cling to a man like Orochimaru! How could you, Kabuto! I'm your fucking sister, your blood and your flesh. Am I nothing to you? How dare you choose him over me? What happened to the Aniki who use to sing me to sleep when I have a nightmare?"

What happened to my older brother who always tried to protect from the villagers that teased me because we're orphans? What happened to you, Kabuto?" By now, Suzumi was in tears, having released all her pain and confusion over the years as she watched her own brother slowly becoming a monster, and being unable to do anything about it.

She had spent years watching and crying silently as Kabuto slowly distanced himself from her. Instead of protecting her as he did when they first joined Orochimaru, he eventually left her to her own devices, uncaring if she came back crying with bruises and injuries. When he left to join Konoha as a spy, Suzumi truly felt abandoned. For the first time in her life, she was completely alone. She had to fend for herself and being a weak ninja as she was, she barely survived on the scraps of attention and assistance that was thrown her way. Sometimes, in the darkest of nights, she wondered if he would care if she died. Those were horrible days, days filled with dark thoughts of suicide and running away. But Suzumi was a realist if nothing else. She knew she could not survive the streets of Oto on her own. Had she left the small but organised arm of Otogakure, she would of eventually become a street whore in the allies of Rice Country. The world was not a nice place then, and she developed the philosophy of staying below the radar in all circumstances in order to survive.

How and why she was chosen to go with the Kuunoki Chuunin Exams, she didn't know. But regardless of the reasons, that one event changed her life. It gave her meaning; it gave her a companion in Kageru. She wasn't alone anymore, and she wasn't 'unwanted' either. For the first time in a long time, she actually wanted to live, and live a full life. If she had to choose between her brother and Kageru's dreams, as painful as it might be to her heart, she would choose Kageru over Kabuto.

Kabuto stayed silent during Suzumi's long winded rant. When she finished, he merely shook his head. "It seems like we've lost what we had before, Suzumi. I'm no longer the caring brother you once had.

And you're no longer the weak, clinging child of a sister I remember. To me, you are nothing."

His words burned Suzumi's heart. "I see. Then there's nothing further I can say. My brother died, and you're my enemy." Not wasting anymore time, Suzumi rushed at Kabuto readying the sound mechanism attached to her arms to release a pulse of sound vibrations at her brother. Ducking under the attack, Kabuto used medical chakra to temporarily cut off his own hearing. He then slashed at Suzumi's arm with a well placed chakra scalpel. Suzumi jumped back and gazed blankly at her broken arm guard. Disregarding the broken tool, she quickly performed a set of seals before breathing in deeply into her lungs, as if in preparation to blow out a giant fire ball. Recognising the technique, Kabuto immediately leapt away from the area as fast as his legs could get him. Opening her mouth widely, Suzumi released a loud echo of sonic vibrations towards where Kabuto had once stood. The intense vibrations and sound waves scared off all the birds within a mile's radius of the blast. The vibrations itself also blasted the ground at point blank range, disintegrating the earth particles as it went along. The impressive thing about this technique is its speed, the technique travels at the speed of sound.

Knowing that he couldn't completely make it to safety, Kabuto substituted himself with a large tree branch from behind Suzumi. Finally safe, Kabuto launched himself at his sister, wanting to strike her from behind. Unfortunately for Kabuto, Kiba and his teammates took that exact moment to appear and attack Kabuto.

Dodging Kiba and then Akamaru's Garouga attacks, Kabuto was finding it difficult to concentrate on sapping and killing the Kikaichu bugs that Shino had launched at him while still making sure to avoid the attacks from the other Konoha Ninja. Having not noticed Hinata join the fight, Kabuto was completely surprised when he felt a sudden and painful palm strike onto his back, right by where his spine was. As a medical ninja himself, he could feel his spinal cord being cut in half, and knew that if he didn't do something now, he was

going to lose. Quickly performing a set of seals, he opened his mouth and released a huge cloud of poisonous smoke, Kiba, Akamaru and Hinata immediately leapt back away from the dangerous plump of smoke.

"He's trying to escape!" Hinata shouted, with her Byakugan eyes activated, she could see how Kabuto managed to regenerate his spine at a phenomenal rate.

"Everyone duck!" Suzumi called out as she released yet another sonic boom blast towards Kabuto's whereabouts, immediately blasting the poisonous cloud away and destroying the ground. Once the dust had cleared, it seems clear that Kabuto had once again avoided the attack by digging underground quickly and escaping that way. Once out of the ground, Kabuto knew that there was no way he could take on all four Ninjas at the same time without revealing his trump card – the Edo Tenshi technique. As such, the only thing he could do was escape. So throwing down another smoke bomb to cover his scent, and a second poisonous pellet to keep the Kikaichu away, he performed a set of seals and teleported himself somewhere safe.

"Damn! I can smell him anymore." Kiba complained loudly.

Shino lifted his sunglasses in contemplation before also admitting. "He killed off the Kikaichu that I attached to his body. I too have lost his tracks."

Hinata sighed before deactivating her Byakugan. "He teleported to a place outside the range of my Byakugan. There's nothing we can do now. Unless we want to spent days, possibly weeks tracking him. I think it is best we meet back up with Shizune-san and report."

The others agreed and soon escorted Suzumi back to the Northern hideout where Kageru and the others were busy activating the seals.

Kakashi lounged comfortably up in a tree reading his favourite book, while his subordinates spread out in protection of their ward. Not that their ward was difficult or anything. The petite girl with short green hair, bright orange eyes and tanned skin was none other than the Nanabi Jinchuriki, simply named Fuu (6). Fuu was your typical outgoing teenager; surprisingly she had not lost her spirit even if she lived the life of a Jinchuriki and a shinobi of the Hidden Waterfall village. She's usually found strapped with a giant scroll in a red sash around her back.

Although looking and acting like a typical girl, Fuu also has a strange fascination with insects of all kind, possibly due to her body's containment of the seven tailed insect beast (7). Due to these strange behaviours, Sakura tried to keep her distance as much as possible, being afraid of certain insects, namely spiders, didn't help. Sasuke and Sai could care less about Fuu's weird fascination, but neither could they stand each other's presence for long. For some odd reason, Sai just rubs Sasuke the wrong way just by breathing close to him, and Sasuke always tries his utmost best to stay away from the creepy lookalike. Unfortunately for him, Sai has an uncanny ability to always suddenly appear near the last Uchiha, resulting in Sasuke having suspicions that Sai was gay. The only one not swayed by everything happening around him was Katana, who took his job of body guarding seriously, if not a little bored.

However, that was all about to change. Kakashi suddenly tensed and called all members of Squad Kakashi to attention. Suddenly appearing before the lot of Konoha Shinobis was Itachi and Kisame, having teleported themselves there using shunshin no jutsu. "It wasn't easy finding you, Nanabi, even if we knew you were in Taki." Kisame stood confidently next to his partner, ignoring the other shinobis as if they were insignificant. "But you see, my blade Samehada just loves powerful chakra. It was kinda insistent in tracking down your scent."

"Hoshigaki Kisame and Uchiha Itachi, ka?" Kakashi placed his precious book away. "Sasuke, you and me will stay and take on

Itachi. Katana-san, I'm sorry but I'll need you to face Kisame. His sword – samehada absorbs chakra like nothing I've ever seen. And you, being one of the only people here who can fight without using chakra may be the only one able to challenge him. Sakura and Sai, please take Fuu and leave this place immediately." Kakashi commanded.

Following Kakashi's orders, Sai immediately drew and summon forth 2 large ink birds. One to carry Sakura and Fuu; the other for himself to provide backup support to the other fighters. Without waiting for any signal, Sasuke immediately ran towards his brother, dual Dao swords at the ready, while Kakashi hung back and threw shurikens at Itachi to assist Sasuke. Itachi didn't even flinch as he threw his own barrage of shuriken back at Kakashi deflecting all of the shurikens aimed at him. Itachi then pulled out two kunais just in time to block Sasuke's larger Dao Swords. Surprisingly, Itachi was able to hold his younger brother back using the two small kunais.

From behind Sasuke, Kakashi pulled up his forehead protector to reveal the single Sharingan eye. He then summoned Raikiri in his hands and launched himself at Itachi from a side angle. Recognising the pincher tactic, Itachi jumped while still holding off Sasuke's onslaught, and kicked out at his younger brother's chest, pushing Sasuke out of the way. Somersaulting while in mid air, Itachi somehow managed to dodge Kakashi's stab and grab onto the copy ninja's arm, twisting it with his own body's momentum and pulling Kakashi to look directly into his eye. "Tsukiyomi." Itachi whispered as he pulled Kakashi into his dream world.

In reality, less than a second had passed before the Kakashi whose arm was held by Itachi evaporated into clouds of smoke. "Kage Bunshin." Itachi surmised even as he felt the emergence of Kakashi from behind him with another Chidori all ready to stab at him. Itachi let Kakashi smash his lightning covered fist into his body, before evaporating into hundreds of flying crows.

"Damn. Kage Bunshin." Kakashi swore as he recognised the fact that Itachi used the same tactic as him.

Having pulled himself back onto his feet from landing awkwardly due to Itachi's kick into the chest, Sasuke put away his Dao swords and immediately launched into a set of seals. "Katon! Gokakyuu no jutsu!" Having reappeared from his exchange with a Kage Bunshin, Itachi too launched a 'Katon Gokakyuu no Jutsu' at Sasuke. And the two giant fire balls clashed, Sasuke's side of the fire slowly but sure gaining momentum and was overpowering Itachi's fire balls.

Unfortunately for Sasuke, Itachi wasn't wasting his time, while still continuing the Gokakyuu no Jutsu, he had been working on summoning Ameterasu with his right eye closed in concentration. When he finally opened his right eye, the bright red fire that was summoned by Itachi suddenly turned black and malevolent. Sasuke's own fire was easily overpowered and he was just about to try and make an escape when a sudden vortex appeared in the middle of thin air, sucking up Itachi's Ameterasu fire into itself. Soon, the fire disappeared and so did the vortex, leaving all three shinobis breathing heavily due to the chakra-exhaustive techniques they've been using.

"I see. You're able to summon forth the Mangekyo Sharingan as well, Kakashi. Kamui (8), I believe this technique is called." Itachi murmured tiredly, his eyes still in pain having used both Tsukiyomi and Ameterasu one after the other.

"Yeah." Kakashi agreed. "It's the only Mangekyo Sharingan technique that I've been able to perform so far."

"Enough chit chatting, Kakashi. Let's just capture Itachi now!" Sasuke shouted passionately, determined to catch his brother once and for all, and wring the truth out of the deceptive man. Did Itachi truly kill the entire Uchiha clan out of orders from the upper echelon of Konoha council? Was there any truth in what his parent's ghosts explained about their planning to undertake a coup de tat against Konoha? Why did Itachi choose the village over his own family? And most of all, why did Itachi spare him? All these questions would only be answered once he had defeated his brother, and Sasuke was impatient to get his answers.

Abandoning using traditional ninja techniques, Sasuke opted to use the Fire Bending techniques that he had learnt off Katono-sama instead, knowing instinctively that if he did so, he would have the upper hand. Throwing punches left, right and centre, Sasuke launched a barrage of smaller, faster fireballs at Itachi, all of whom the elder Uchiha managed to dodge. Squatting down low, Sasuke performed two long leg sweeps at Itachi, releasing two large waves of fire walls towards his brother. This time, Itachi did something completely unexpected; he lifted his hands up horizontally across his face, open palms facing down. Taking a deep breath, he released his breath just as his hands pushed downward, and in an instant, Sasuke's flame walls ceased to exist.

"Impossible! You know fire-bending?" Sasuke's wide eyes and opened mouth showed his inner shock, never having thought that Itachi would have known this ancient art.

"Only the basics; which just so happen to be how to stop fires. Nowhere near as proficient as you..." Itachi huffed as he regarded his little brother. "Yuuki-sama barely started teaching me the basics before she passed away. It was to help me learn about the nature of fire, and be able to use my fire techniques more efficiently. Now, it's time to end this."

Concentrating once more and closing one eye, Itachi focussed on calling forth the Ameterasu technique once again. Sasuke tried to interrupt his brother's concentration by launching a barrage of shuriken and kunai at him (all of which Itachi dodged) followed by one of his more powerful techniques. "Katon! Ryuuka no Jutsu!"

Itachi jumped and tried his best to avoid the massive flaming dragon head launched his way but was unable to avoid sustaining some damage, his right arm and left leg had been scorched by some of the flames of the technique, leaving him dangerously crippled and unable to jump away anymore. However, it no longer mattered as he had his technique ready already. "Ameterasu!"

Once more, the famed black flames of hell erupted all around the three fighters. Kakashi valiantly staggered in front of his student and once more used his sole Mangekyo Technique to save them.

"Kamui!" The vortex came into existence and this time it was a battle of will and how much chakra each had to see who can out last who. Itachi kept the black flames coming, while Kakashi desperately held Kamui open.

"Kakashi, please hold him off just a second more, while I prepare my lightning attack!" Sasuke shouted at his sensei over the roar of the flames. Breathing deeply, he tried to stay calm and focussed on separating his chi into both positive and negative energy. Moving his arms in slow patterns, never losing his concentration, Sasuke knew that he only had one chance at using this technique and if it didn't work, they were screwed.

Itachi noticed that Sasuke was acting strangely while still standing behind Kakashi. Knowing his brother would probably start attacking him soon, Itachi opted to release Ameterasu and called forth his final technique in preparation. The moment the flames had all disappeared, Kakashi collapsed onto the ground, barely conscious. He had never had to hold Kamui so long before and it had completely drained his body of all his chakra. Now all he could do is lie there and hope for the best.

By then, Sasuke had already prepared his technique. "Lightning!" Pointing his fingers forward, Sasuke released his focus and guided the massive amount of raw lightning towards where he wished to aim it, directly at Itachi. The huge surge of lightning smashed into Itachi's prone form and destroyed much of their surrounding area. Once the clouds had cleared, Itachi's prone form could be seen lying on the ground.

Sasuke dropped to his knees in exhaustion, his arms shaking with the effort to hold himself up. */ Damn. I'm still not good at lightning-bending yet. Maybe I should stick with my 'Kirin' (9) technique. But damn it, Kirin takes too long and either way, they both use way too much chakra. If I continue to fight, I'll have to use the curse seal. /*

Sasuke thought to himself, wanting to drag himself to his feet and check on his brother but simply too exhausted to do so.

However, when Sasuke finally managed to get to his feet, he watched silently as Itachi too, slowly managed to drag himself on to his own feet. Surrounding Itachi was a vaguely translucent form of a large skeleton. "You've become strong, Sasuke. If I hadn't used this, I would've been obliterated." Standing straight, Itachi announced in a firm but tired voice. "Behold... The last weapon in my arsenal – Susano."

Slowly but surely, Itachi staggered his way towards Sasuke, dragging along his injured and burnt leg and arm. Sasuke, in a fit of anger and desperation threw all his weapons (Shuriken, Kunai and kunai bombs) at his brother to stop his approach, all of which dissipated when it met the barrier that is Susano. Sasuke knew that the only way he could continue fighting is if he released the curse seal.

During his bout of indecision on whether or not to use the curse seal's power, Sai joined the fight by summoning forth large ink creatures to attack Itachi from the air. Once again, the ink creatures splattered into non-existence when they met the impenetrable form of Susano. Somewhat irritated at the flying shinobi's interruption, Itachi had Susano call forth the legendary sword of Totsuka. The sword of Totsuka, also known as Sakegari's katana, is a spirit sword with no real physical form that carried sealing powers. Anything pierced by it becomes trapped in a blissful dream-like genjutsu for all eternity. And with this blade, Susano pierced the ink bird in which Sai was standing on. While dropping from the sky, Sai tried to open up another scroll and draw himself another ink animal but he was caught in mid air by the large hand of Susano. Screaming in pain at being crushed, Sai was thrown down by the massive spirit creature, slamming hard against the rocky surface of the earth and losing his consciousness immediately.

"Sai!" Although there was no lost of love or friendship between the two, they were still comrades in arms, and watching Sai so easily

taken out caught Sasuke completely off guard. During his induced fear, he hadn't realised that Itachi had finally made his way to stand directly in front of him. Just when Sasuke was about to use the curse seal, Itachi lightly tapped two fingers onto Sasuke's forehead, leading Sasuke to remember the familiar touch from so long ago. In his distraction, Sasuke almost missed Itachi's next words.

His brother smiled sadly, eyes closing with unshed tears. "There. It's done. I'm sorry, Sasuke. But there probably won't be a next time." With that said Itachi slowly turned away from his little brother and dragged himself away.

For a long moment, Sasuke just stood silently before he suddenly fell onto his knees, unbelieving that he had been so close to Itachi and without either one of them trying to kill each other. It was surreal. When he finally brought himself out of his stupor, Sasuke shouted at the retreating form of Itachi. "Itachi! Why? Why didn't you kill me along with them? Why did you disobey orders and spare me! Why?" With lines of tears flowing down his face, Sasuke screamed at his brother, begging for a reason, a reason for his existence.

Itachi paused for a second before answering without turning around, having already guessed that somehow Sasuke knew of the truth from that night long ago. "I loved the village more than I love my clan, but I loved you more than I loved the village. I had to choose... and I made the only choice that would not completely break me."

His words rang true in Sasuke's heart, but it did not void any of the hurt inside. "Please come home." Sasuke begged finally. "Please just come home with me... I... I want my brother back..." He stated quietly to the wind, ignoring the tears that flowed down his face.

This time, Itachi did turn around to look at Sasuke, again giving his brother a small but sad smile. "Gomen ne, little brother. I can't go home, not now and possibly never. There's still something I must do, someone I must protect." Gulping his own pain down his throat, Itachi sought to say goodbye for the final time. "I hope... that my gift to you will be useful... Goodbye Otouto."

And with those words, Itachi disappeared, using the last ounce of chakra he had to shunshin away from the area, abandoning the Nanabi Jinchuriki and his brother.

Having ran some distance away for their own fight, Kisame and Katana was going at it like the swordsman they were. Kisame with Samehada had the power and the length to their advantage, while Katana being short and fast, had speed and multiple swords (4 of them) to his advantage. Whenever Kisame tried to slice into Katana, the younger boy would dodge only to come back with his own multi-slash with at least three different swords, all of which would be somewhat blocked by Kisame. Having had enough of this tug of war, Kisame swung his sword hard and furious, forcing Katana to temporary retreat. Once the boy was at a distance, Kisame did not waste any time summoning his favourite technique. "Suiton! Bakushouha (Water Element: Aquatic Shockwave)!" Opening his mouth, Kisame released an ocean's worth of water into the surrounding, drowning Katana completely. Sakura and Fuu stayed on the flying ink bird and were the only ones to escape Kisame's technique.

While Katana was still drowning under the water, Kisame quickly applied another set of seals. "Suiton Goshouku Zame! (Water Element Five Shark Feeding Frenzy)" Unfortunately for Kisame, even undertaken Katana was incredibly fast and quickly sliced up the summoned sharks in no time before finally pulling himself out and onto the surface of the water. Even though Katana does not use any chakra in his sword technique (its pure speed and strength) he can use chakra for simple things like water walking and tree climbing.

Sakura and Fuu were just about to decide to go down and help out Katana when a sudden explosion erupted from behind them, destroying the ink bird summon and dropping Sakura and Fuu straight down into Kisame's watery grave. Fuu was just about ready to summon his Bijuu's power when she was grabbed by yet another member of Katasuki. Deidara grinned at the surprised teenage girl

for a second before slamming his fist into her stomach causing her to lose consciousness. "Well, this certainly is my day! No sign of Uchiha, Kisame-baka dealing with the left over shinobi, and I get to bring back 2 Jinchuriki. Hehe! Leader is gonna so praise me!" Deidara laughed haughtily before decided to leave his fellow Akatsuki members to deal with the fallout while he easily flew away on his clay creature.

Unfortunately for Sakura, no one was there to break her fall, so she slammed into the body the body as one would slam into hard concrete, losing her consciousness immediately. Although she had tried her best to land upright with chakra on her feet to smooth away the entry, unfortunately due to the rapid speed of her fall, there was nothing she could do to break her fall.

Having seen Deidara's entrance and now exit from the corner of his eye, Kisame decided to cut this fight short, and hopefully he could catch up to the bomb obsessed maniac and argue about the semantics of stealing each other's Jinchurikis. "Let's finish this, little brat." Kisame taunted as he launched into yet another set of seals.

Katana ran at Kisame and was just about to reach him when Kisame completed his seal. "Water Element! Water Shark Missile!" A large sharp burst out of the water waiting to swallow Katana whole, the poor boy hand the slap one of his swords into the brain of the shark in order to disperse it as its giant jaws clamp down on him. When Katana re-emerged from the water near where Kisame stood, the boy was about to stab at the Kiri Nukenin but was suddenly caught by the Suiro no Jutsu (Water Prison technique). It was only then that Katana noticed he's being held by only a water clone, as the real Kisame was slowly walking away. *I Damn it. Looks like I'm really no match for him at all.* Katana cursed at himself, knowing from the beginning that it was a bad match up. Yes, he might have fared a little better than say the other Konoha Shinobis, but Katana was a close combat fighter relying heavily on his speed being the far superior than his opponents. Unfortunately for him, Kisame was a renowned swordsman himself, and though big, the man was damn

fast with his own sword and strong too; couple that with Kisame's damaging techniques, it's a wonder how Katana had fared so well.

Katana's self cursing was cut short however when yet another person joined the battle. A young man with spiky red hair and black highlights on the tip of the man's fringe and back was standing in front of Kisame, blocking the big man's path. Katana recognised this young man as being one of the original shinobis that participated in the Kuunoki Chuunin Exam some years ago – Kapasu Juro. What surprised Katana however was the cold icy visage of the boy turned man as compared to his younger version.

Kapasu Juro (10) had been a weak ninja when he entered the Kuunoki Chuunin Exam, with no will nor ambition to fight let alone live the life of a ninja. However, having watched his teammates (Harate Echiko and Harate Eiji) killed and maimed right in front of him, Katana mused that it must have changed the boy's outlook on life drastically.

Juro paid no attention to the trapped Katana and remained focussed on Kisame. "Hoshigaki Kisame. By the name of the Godaime Mizukage, I, Kapasu Juro will take your head..."

"Tsunade-sama." Jubei called out to the Kage as she prepares herself to leave Konoha for the first time since her inauguration into the post.

"Yes?" She pulled on her normal green jacket with the word for 'gambling' at the back. There was absolutely no way that she would wear the bloody Hokage robe to the 5 Kage summit.

"I've just received news from Katana. Team Kakashi met up with Uchiha Itachi and Kisame. During the fight, a Mist Ninja by the name of Kapasu Juro joined in the fight and it is presumed that Kisame was killed by him, although Katana was not close enough to verify it. However, Itachi escaped, and the Nanabi Jinchuriki was captured by another member of Akatsuki – Zetsu. The members of Team Kakashi

have been injured during this encounter so I'm thinking of calling them back to Konoha, and I'll send Akiko, Maya and Seiko out to hunt the injured Itachi instead."

Upon thinking over Jubei's ideas, Tsunade nodded. "Sounds good. With Jiraiya here to take care of things, and you to look out for Konoha's external security, I feel a lot better about leaving you guys to look after things in my and Shizune's absence."

"I've also received news from Shizune-san's front. Seems the new seal developed by Yuse Samure is working well. He and the others will be returning to Konoha once they have finished in Oto to treat Mitarashi Anko-san. Upon their return, Sasayaki Kageru should be providing us with all the promised information. Kiba, Shino and Hinata-chan were sent on a pursuit of Yakushi Kabuto, and although they lost the traitor, they probably have some information on him as well. I'm going to recall them back to Konoha for a proper report." Jubei provided the last of his news before farewelling the Godaime Hokage.

"Thanks Jubei. I can see that you'll become a wonderful advisor to Naruto once he becomes Hokage." Tsunade smirked at Jubei's raised eyebrow. "Oh please. I've already started politically manoeuvring the council so that he is seen in a positive light. Eventually they're going to call on him to take the mantle, that is, once he proves himself as a superior ninja." Jubei could only nod in return, having nothing to add to Tsunade's future plans. Regardless of whether Naruto becomes the Hokage or not, he was going to do his best to protect his master and prince.

"Alright!" Opening the door, Tsunade stepped out of her office only to meet the faces of her three entourage – Maito Gai, Nara Shikaku and Hyuuga Neji. *I If I hadn't sent Kakashi out on that mission, I would have asked him to come instead of Gai. Oh well, pickers can't be choosers. I would of probably picked Hiashi instead of Neji, but Hiashi said that Neji is just as good with his Byakugan.* "Gai, Shikaku and Neji. Let's go." Turning to leave her office, Tsunade looked forward to the 5 Kage summit and what it would entail.

End.

Yah, another chapter done. Sorry for cutting the fight between Kisame and Juro like that, I will put it in later as a flashback. I just thought this chapter is way long in its own right, so it doesn't need any more juice in it.

(1) Mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, that Koushiro and Hikari had gone to Kumo. To refresh yourself about these 2 original characters, please go to my profile page and re-read their character profiles.

(2) Mentioned in the previous chapter, Akiko went to the Fire nation capital with Naruto, Jiraiya and Yamato. To refresh yourself about this original character, please go to my profile page and re-read their character profiles.

(3) Mentioned briefly in the previous chapter, that Tori, Yami and Mishizu left Konoha to spread the word on Akatsuki and the destruction of the Kuunoki village. To refresh yourself about these 3 original characters, please go to my profile page and re-read their character profiles.

(4) Most of it is made up, some of it I copied from research on embryonic stem cells. (off Wikipedia)

(5) Yes, this is Hotaru from one of the Cannin episodes. The one related to the Rokubi Jinchuriki – Utakata of the Hidden Mist.

(6) According to the Naruto Illustration book, the name of the 7 tailed beast Jinchuriki is name 'Fuu' or 'Fu'. She appeared during the cover page of Naruto manga volume 46, chapter 420 as well as the Naruto Illustration book. I'll try to get a picture of them up on my website for those of you who don't follow the manga.

(7) I've no clue what the name of the 'Nanabi' actually is, but a Naruto fan sent me a message it's called the 'One Horned Beetle.'

There was a brief picture of it in the canon Naruto manga series, volume 50 chapter 467 and a spread on it in the Naruto Illustration book. It looked like a giant insect/dragon fly with 3 pairs of wings (e.g. 6 wings) and one long tail. Again, I'll try to get a picture up on my website to show this strange creature.

(8) Kakashi's special 'spatial/dimensional wrapping technique' is called 'Kamui'. This was revealed in the Naruto Canon manga series, volume 52, chapter 487 when he tried to swallow up Madara but failed.

(9) Sasuke's lightning bending has similar power (destructive power that is) to his 'Kirin' technique in the Naruto manga. But I find that 'Kirin' takes a lot of time to prepare. You need to literally build a 'storm' in order to use it. While the lightning bending can be done anytime, anywhere.

(10) Kapasu Juro, Harate Echiko and Harate Eiji were genins from the Hidden Mist Village that participated in the Kuunoki Chuunin Exams. Eiji was later killed by Kisame, and Echiko had her arms cut off, and falling into a coma due to the shock. Since then, Juro had sworn to kill Kisame in vengeance.

Wow. Things are heating up. Coming in the next chapter, what happened with Itachi – does he live or die. What happened to Ruri, and Naruto? Kaga Vs Pein and the 5 Kage Summit. Stay tuned!

Scenes V

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 9: Scenes V

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" **Demon's talk** ", / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

Warning: More building of the plot and jumping from one 'scene' to another. Hope you enjoy.

Chapter 9

In five different parts of the world, shinobis gathered to say farewell and god's speed to their respected and admired leaders, whom in their hands now hold the future of the world...

(Suna Gakure no Sato)

"You're late, Kankurou!" Temari complained as her younger brother rushed towards her with a large box behind his back.

"It took me a while to figure out this new trick." Kankurou apologised, bowing slightly to his younger brother.

"Be careful, Kazekage-sama. Kankuro, Temari, Ino-san, please take good care of him." Many of the villages (shinobi and civilians alike) turned out in masses to wish their beloved Kage well.

"We will. Thank you everyone for turning up." Ino waved excited at the crowd, although many noticed how close she was standing next to Gaara, who remained silent at the mass's support for him.

"Not that Gaara needs any protection..." Kankurou muttered beneath his breath.

(Iwa Gakure no Sato)

"Kurozuchi, Akazuchi, Ahiru (1)! Take good care of the old man!" A voice shouted above the others in the large crowd that surrounded the four ninjas.

"Tsuchikage! Show those other Kages what you've got!" Another voice rang out.

"It's a pain going to a meeting at my age." An old man, short and stumpy complained while still standing as dignified as he could in his old age. "You youngsters don't understand what it's like when your hips are a virtual time bomb."

"How about retiring then, gramps? You can't rely on your former glory forever." A girl with short black haired grinned cheekily at the old man.

"Ahahaha. I'll take your luggage, Tsuchikage-sama!" A large, rather round man helpfully picked up the older man's backpack and was just about to strap it on his old shoulders when he was interrupted by the older man.

"Don't touch my stuff, Akazuchi! I don't need your help!" The old man rebutted. But upon pulling his pack back and strapping it on himself,

a loud 'crack' could be heard in the vicinity of the old man's spine.
"OWWWWW! My Hips!"

Sighing, the black haired girl simply shook her head. "What do you say? Should we send someone else in the Tsuchikage's place?" She asked sarcastically at their fourth teammate, who had so far remained silent.

"Ano, Tsuchikage-sama. Maybe you should give me the pack and Akatsuch-sani can carry you." A medium height, brown haired girl with hazel eyes tried to reason with the old, stubborn man. She had her long hair tied back in two pigtails and showed off her youth, even though her village's jounin outfit belied her youthfulness in comparison to her battle strengths.

"Don't be ridiculous! Who do you think I am? I am the Tsuchikage, the great and fearsome leader of Iwagakure!" The old man gripped tightly to his package, refusing to look weak in front of his ninjas.

Sighing again, the black haired girl named Kurotsuchi signalled for the large man to grab onto both the Tsuchikage and his luggage.
"Alright, now let's go."

(Kirigakure no sato)

"Take good care of Mizukage. Make sure nothing goes wrong, okay." An old, thin man with trembling fingers urged as he gave his honourable leader the Kage hat which symbolised all of Kiri's power.

Gently taking the hat from the old man, a beautiful woman with long luscious hair stated kindly. "Thank you sir. I swear on my name as Godaime Mizukage that I will fulfil my duty."

"Hohohoho." The old man softly laughed.

"Hey, as members of the seven swordsmen of the Mist, you all have to protect the Mizukage with your life! Remember that!" Another

member of the crowd pressed.

A youthful shinobi standing next to the Mizukage hesitantly stated.
"I... I think... I'll be fine... probably."

"Have faith in yourself, kid. You're strong." A third member of the crowd encouraged.

"That's why you were chosen to guard me, okay Chojiro-kun?" The Mizukage smiled disarmingly at the young Ninja, resulting in the young man blushing at her compliment.

"Uh... Yeah... I'll try my best." The teen grinned sheepishly. /
Mizukage-sama is so kind... /

"All you need to say is 'Yes, Ma'am!' No one wants to hear your waffling! Man, why can't you be more like Juro over there. You kids nowadays really have it too easy. Just be a man..." An older Ninja complained as he glared unhappily at the blushing youth.

"Ao... Enough with the lecture. You need to hurry or you'll be late for the meeting!" "Yeah, and Juro-san doesn't seem to be happy about the wait either." Another voice rang out from the crowd.

The newly introduced Ao glanced quickly at their forth member, silent as always standing some distance away. He never could understand the kid. Kapasu Juro (2) was one of the weakest, most useless ninja in Kirigakura not more than three years ago. But upon returning from the Kuunoki Chuunin Exams, the kid became obsessed with training and becoming stronger, jumping to Chuunin and then Jounin in a matter of a few months. The boy then challenged, defeated and then killed his own grandfather, claiming one of the seven great swords for himself. After that, the enigmatic red-head has been a loyal follower of the new Mizukage, helping her rise to power and remaining in the shadow as her bodyguard, spy and assassin.

Ao was just about to complain again about the sheer difference between Juro and the timid Chojiro when he was interrupted by the

Mizukage whispering in his year. "Ao, Shut up or I'll kill you." Obediently, he shut up.

"Come on, Chojiro, Juro, Ao. Let's go." Waving to the crowd, Mizukage-sama smiled angelically while she started moving towards her destination, ignoring Ao's irritated look, Chojiro's hero-worship and Juro's indifference.

(Kumogakure no sato)

Giving a loud stomp on the ground, the large dark skinned man known as the Raikage commanded loudly: "Alright! Let's go." With those words he smashed his way through a window, out of the floating castle that is the Hidden Cloud Village and landing on the snow covered ground below, leaving behind his three guards and a secretary.

Giving a heavy sigh, the female secretary glanced at the new broken window with an irritated look. "Not again. That's gonna come out of his personal pay, if I have anything to say about it." She muttered under her breath. "You guys better follow him before we lose his tracks. Darui, Shii, Bado."

"Yeah, and he complains about me using that window as an entrance all the time. Hypocrite!" A tall brown haired, light skinned man groused. Turning to the secretary, Bado issued his own orders. "After losing Nii Yugito, he's been acting a little irrational, probably fearing that Akatsuki would go after Bee-san. Please tell Sakeyama Asahi and his sister Sakeyama Saporu that I'm requesting a favour of the Sakeyama family, to ask them to look after Killer Bee-san in my stead. Can you do that?"

Once the secretary had nodded in agreement, Bado too jumped through the man shaped hole that was once the window pane in the Raikage's office, leaving the other two guards behind.

"I think I'll take the stairs, Shii." The dark skinned Darui comments walking towards the doors instead of the window.

On the journey towards Iron country, the Konoha contingency stopped over at a small town. Tsunade was very tempted to go to the local pub and gambling dens to spurge a bit on her favourite activity other than drinking sake. But having three guards always surrounding her, one of which being a Hyuuga, she was just never given the opportunity and gripped about her missed chance for the next several days on the road. The three talked a bit about security, the Iron Country in general as well as speculating on what Jiraiya was up-to as interim Hokage. None the less, the journey was uneventful and passed quickly.

Days later, the five strongest shinobis in the world sat around a round table – a first in shinobi history. "Please place your hats on the table." The host of this summit, leader of the Iron Country stated courteously. "You are here today because the Raikage has called this meeting. My name is Mifune. I will be your moderator. The meeting will now begin."

Instantly, Gaara opened the forum. "Please let me initiate this meeting. I have something to say so please listen." Before he could start, he was interrupted by the Tsuchikage.

"The Five Kages sure have changed. It's impressive that you call yourself a Kage at that age, Kazekage-dono. It seems that while your old man surely trained you well, he wasn't able to teach you any manners." The oldest Kage in the summit replied rather snidely.

"I suppose you're right, Tsuchikage. And yet, here I am – the Kazekage of Suna, one of the five great nations." Gaara answered calmly.

"Gaha.. What a cheeky guy." Tsuchikage laughed at his impudence, a bit put off that the boy wasn't intimidated at all.

"Tsuchikage-sama, that's enough, stop teasing him. If you could continue, Kazekage-sama." The Mizukage interrupted the back and forth arguments, wanting to get to the heart of the issue.

"I was a former Jinchuriki. I was held by Akatsuki and came to the brink of death when the Bijuu was extracted from my body. As such, I consider the Akatsuki to be an extremely dangerous entity. They threatened to destroy Suna just to get to me and almost succeeded, and indeed did succeed in capturing myself." Pausing a little, Gaara continued. "I appealed for cooperation among the five Kages many times but was ignored, except for the Hokage – who had single-handedly undertaken thorough investigation into Akatsuki's dealings, their members and the strengths of those members. I believe Jiraiya, Sannin of Konoha had forwarded missives to all Kages, informing us of the impending danger, and yet, here we are... with only the Hachibi and Kyuubi Jinchuriki remaining. We let the Jinchurikis be snatched away. Our cooperation came too late, even with the forewarning provided weeks in advance. My question... is why." Gaara's last words were harsh and demanding.

Silence reigned for a short period before Tsuchikage bravely intervened. "Hmph. The fact that the Hidden Villages of the five great nations allowed the Jinchuriki to be abducted puts us in a bad light among the other nations. It's a show of weakness and embarrassing. It's common sense to try to recover the Jinchurikis quietly and privately. There's no way we'd seek cooperation when they were taken."

Staring impassively at the Tsuchikage, Gaara intoned: "Appearances... dignity... what worthless, old-fashioned ideas." Tsuchikage glared in return.

Trying to defuse the situation, Mizukage interrupted again. "Just because the Bijuus were taken doesn't mean we have immediate cause for alarm. Controlling them will require jutsu, knowledge and time after all."

"Since the Jinchuriki and Bijuu grow together, they need to adapt to one another. Even then, control is difficult. It can't be done in an instant." Tsuchikage agreed somewhat reluctantly.

Before the discussion could snowball further, Tsunade decided to get involved. "That's not the point. Or have you all forgotten that Uzumaki Ruri have now officially joined the Akatsuki. She is the most renowned person in the entire world in the use of Fuuin Jutsu. There's no way we can even guess how she's helping Akatsuki control the power of the Bijuus. It's true that in the past, the only ones able to truly control the Bijuu are my grandfather – the first Hokage Senju Hashirama, his rival Uchiha Madara, the fourth Mizukage Yagura who was a Jinchuriki himself, and rumours have it Raikage-dono's younger brother Killer Bee. However, none of that matters if they have Ruri working for them." She emphasized strongly. "We may not have the 'time' we thought we did. We can't underestimate the Akatsuki!"

The Raikage smashed his fist impatiently onto the table. "Enough with the useless jabbering!" He shouted in frustration, he glanced up to see a siege of shinobis were aiming their weapons at him only to be blocked by his own guards. Bado especially was glaring at the Raikage with an offended expression on his face as he held firmly onto the giant fist of the large Iwa ninja that was the bodyguard of the Tsuchikage. Bado's expression distinctly says 'Do you really need to do this?'

"This is a conference. I'd like to ask that you all mind your manners." Mifune stated calmly, completely ignoring the giant dent on the table.

Sighing, Tsunade snapped at Neji and Gai to get back at her side, while Shikaku stayed exactly where he had been standing, right behind Tsunade herself. Gaara too called back Kankurou and Temari. Under the table, he gave Ino's hand a light squeeze of reassurance knowing instinctively she had been just a second away from launching a poisonous needle at the Raikage in retaliation. The Mizukage called back her ninjas Ao and Chojiro. Surprisingly, Juro

had not moved from his position standing on the sides of the room's wall. The other ninjas quickly and quietly returned to their posts.

The next few minutes were spent having all the bodyguards move to the balcony above the room, the five kages returned to their original discussion. "Konoha! Iwa! Suna! Kiri! Akatsuki is composed of missing-nins from your villages! And that's not all! There's evidence that some of you, including your predecessors, have made use of Akatsuki!"

Raikage's comment immediately raised outbursts from Gaara and Tsunade, denying that they had never done so. But Raikage simply ignored their outbursts and continued on with his accusation. "I don't trust any of you! I only called this conference was to find out how trustworthy you half-assed bunch are!"

"What do you mean by 'made use of them'?" Gaara immediately inquired, silent fury bled into his once blank expression.

"Huh! You're supposed to be the Kazekage, and yet they haven't told you anything? Ask the old timers in your own village!" Raikage pointed an accusing finger at all the other Kage's in the room. "You guys have used Akatsuki during times of war in the past!"

"At this point, the great nations have all stabilised. They're switching from military expansion to disarmament. As the tensions among the nations ease and the threat of war decreases, the villages which hold the nation's military power are nothing more than money-sucking annoyances. On the other hand, there's a risk to military reduction too. Just watch if there's a sudden outbreak of war! In that case, there'd be the problem of depending on shinobi without real combat experience. And that would mean losing the war. One way to eliminate that risk is a group of mercenaries." The Tsuchikage explained blandly, as if unconcerned about Raikage's accusations. "While it takes time and money to raise superior shinobi in your own village. A professional group of mercenaries like Akatsuki are career fighters that is always on duty. And they'll undertake a war for low pay, while delivering excellent results."

"Don't sound so fucking proud of it, Tsuchikage!" Raikage demanded.

"Hrmph!" Tsuchikage snorted.

"Suna used Akatsuki to destroy Konoha – Orochimaru. However, we're not sure if he was still an active member of Akatsuki at that time. This then resulted in the death of Yondaime Kazekage and Sandaime Hokage. It's hard to shake the feeling that this could all be part of someone's plan." Raikage glared at all the Kage's, waiting for anyone to refute his claims.

Tsunade quickly rebutted with no concern over the fallout. "Our intelligence shows that Orochimaru abandoned Akatsuki between five to six years ago or more. He set up his own village – Otogakure, without permission from the Akatsuki. His invasion on the Konoha are his own actions. However, during the second invasion, four Akatsuki members took advantage of the confusion to infiltrate Konoha and was almost successful in capturing their intended target. It took the combined efforts of some of the Kuunoki's strongest ninjas to kick them out."

"And yet, here they are refugees in your village because their lady betrayed them and joined their greatest enemy, Akatsuki. Just face it, there's no one in the world you can truly trust now!" Raikage predicted an uncharacteristically gloomy future. Turning his focus now on the Mizukage, he continued his charge. "The most suspicious is the Hidden Mist! You from the mist have no diplomatic ties. There's even the rumour that it's the birthplace of Akatsuki!"

The Mizukage looked hesitant for a moment before deciding to speak. "Since it's come to this, I'll speak plainly. It's come into question whether the previous Mizukage – Yagura, was under some outside influence. It's possible that influence was Akatsuki, which is why I didn't want to draw attention to it." She admitted frankly.

"Damn you! Each and every one of you..." Before the Raikage could go off on another rant, Tsunade interrupted yet again with even more

disturbing news.

"It's recently come into Konoha's intelligence that Uchiha Madara is alive, and he's possibly the true leader of Akatsuki. If he is indeed alive, then he could very well have taken control of the Yondaime Mizukage and forced him to carry out all his wishes." The other four Kage stared at Tsunade in shock.

"Surely he should have been long dead?" Tsuchikage almost stuttered.

"I don't understand it either. But this is reliable intelligence." Tsunade stated grimly before deciding to open the floodgates. "It came into question when some truths were revealed regarding the Uchiha Clan Massacre some years ago. Uchiha Madara had participated in the killing of members of the Uchiha clan, and after he took Uchiha Itachi away as his apprentice. I don't really know when he formed the Akatsuki, but Konoha intelligence have investigated and is under the belief that their main base now reside in the Hidden Rain Village."

The five Kages remained silent for a time, before Mifune as the moderator decided to input his own opinion. "Please listen to my opinion as the head of a neutral power. Akatsuki's leader has read the flow of this era. He stabbed at the gaps in the equilibrium and distrust among the nations and measured the expansion of their strength... The same goes for this, the Iron Country... But the disaster has been averted and has become good fortune for use... After all, haven't all five Kages come together, which seldom happens? What do you think? Until Akatsuki is dealt with... Perhaps you should create the world's first ninja alliance among the five great hidden villages?"

"Alliance?" Raikage asked in disbelief.

"It's a good idea. We need a level of cooperation appropriate to the state of emergency." Gaara agreed instantly.

"It would be best to unify the chain of command. We need to protect ourselves against further disorder." Mifune insisted.

"So... The question is, who do we entrust with authority over the allied forces?" Tsuchikage thought out loud.

"You will only quarrel amongst yourselves... therefore, from my position at the head of the neutral nation; I would like to suggest which among you five Kage would be most suitable." Mifune suggested somewhat firmly. "It is my opinion that we should entrust the leadership of the Ninja Alliance... to the Hokage."

Upon his declaration, calls of disbelief and anger erupted from the other Kages.

"I don't agree with this! No one from our village is involved in Akatsuki! I am the only one trustworthy enough to..." Raikage's rant was cut off by Mifune.

"I beg to differ." When asked to explain his reasoning, Mifune merely pointed at his somewhat dented table. "It's true that some amount of emotion and power is necessary to lead so many strong warriors... but someone like you who lets his emotions control him will destroy the alliance as surely as you destroyed that table. I am simply offering my suggestion as a neutral party. The Kazekage is too young to lead. The other countries will never accept it. Even addressing him as Kazekage is hard for some. The Tsuchikage on the other hand is too old and is seen as having mobility problems. Furthermore, he has been used by Akatsuki too many times. He is the least trustworthy. Kirigakure is the seat of the origin of Akatsuki. If the Mizukage were in charge, there would be worried about information leaks. There would be concerns about spies too. I don't know what Akatsuki plans with the tailed beasts. But we can't let them have the last two Jinchuriki no matter what."

Before the Raikage can erupt yet again, Tsunade interrupted. "Thank you for your strong support in Konoha's favour, Mifune-san."

However, as the Godaime Hokage of Konoha, I regret to inform you that I wish to decline the position."

Again, shocked silence reigned in the room. Tsunade waited for this new piece of news to be digested before continuing on with her explanation. "It is a great honour to take the lead role. However, at this point in time, Konoha is not strong enough handle the responsibility as we too need to uncover any hidden links between Akatsuki and our own internal factions, which have recently come to the surface. I, myself, am currently neck deep in political and tactical warfare with some of the village's internal parties."

Once everyone had calmed down and accepted her refusal of the position, Tsunade launched into her own idea – having discussed this with Jiraiya before she left Konoha. "As a renowned medic, I specialise in medical support and I can bring that to the table of this ninja alliance. Not only that, Konoha can supply the alliance with accurate and up-to-date intelligence. Those two items are critical in any war, and having Konoha focused on those fronts, I do not believe I have the capability to also set my attention on offensive manoeuvres against the Akatsuki. What I propose, gentlemen and ladies, is a fractured governing body, with the leader of the alliance focused on organising strategic plans against the Akatsuki, while the other Kages take on specific roles – one to lead the front line soldiers, one to take on support duties (organisation of medical support, intelligence or other such specialities), one to act as reserve, and the last to run interference and or act as our own offensive unit, targeting the heart of the Akatsuki and disrupting their plans for the Bijuu."

The meeting at the five Kage summit lasted through the day and went long into the night. Ideas were brought forth, debated and hashed out, before the skeleton of a detailed plan was formed. Raikage would be the overall leader of the Ninja alliance. Gaara would lead the front line soldiers with Mifune's samurai soldiers as support. Tsunade would take responsibility for all support necessities. Mizukage would be their reserve and Tsuchikage would

be the wild card thrown into the throe whenever necessary. For the first time in ninja history, the five great nations were working together to fight a common enemy.

Itachi staggered and leaned heavily against a tree. Completely exhausted of his body's chakra, Itachi's using pure will power to keep his body moving. He had to keep on moving, he had to somehow free Ruri from Akatsuki. Although he understood her reasons for joining Akatsuki, he completely disagreed with her methods. Having recognised that Akatsuki was the only, single organisation that was strong enough to challenge the existence of the 7 high councillors of the Kuunoki, she had joined them willingly, using their influence to set herself, her people and Naruto free of their birth right duties. However, she basically swapped one cage for another, while ensuring her people the freedom to join other villages, enabling them to do what they feel is right. Itachi could not agree with her sacrifice, for he did not want her to continue to live in yet another glass house. That was one of the reasons why he had pushed his body to the limit, learning the three powerful Mangekyou Sharingan techniques before he reached the age of 20. He had originally planned to use Ameterasu on the 7 high councillors to free Ruri, but his own plans had been waylaid by Pein's own.

Stepping on a tree root, Itachi stumbled and fell forward onto the ground. Grunting in pain, he used his unburnt hand to roll his body over until he was facing the sky. */ Who am I kidding? The moment she's out of my and Pein's sight, Madara will swoop in to have her captured somehow. I have to stop him, but in my current state, I'm useless... /* Itachi could feel a single tear escape his right eye and fell across his face, he ignored it just as he had ignored the inner pain he's been carrying for years. */ Perhaps I shouldn't have granted Sasuke's my powers so soon, not when I still plan on facing Madara... but the chance was simply too good to pass up. I owe him too much... All those years I've missed... he's grown up to be a fine man, my little brother. /* Here Itachi couldn't help but smile as he

mentally compared his once cute and innocent brother to the young man he's become.

Unfortunately, that was also the moment Itachi started coughing up blood. He kept on hacking up his own life blood out of his abused throat for many minutes before simply turning his head away from the sky, allowing the bile and blood to slowly ooze out of his lips. / *Damn... looks like even though I don't want to die, the gods will not allow me to stay much longer... I'm so very proud of you, Sasuke. /* More tears leaked out of his eyes, and Itachi couldn't be bothered to stop them. / *Yuuki-sama... I'm so sorry. The prophecy you gave me... The one favour you asked of me... I don't think I can keep my promise... I swore... if the time came... I would protect the one which you hold most dear to you... I'm so sorry... /*

Just as Itachi's eyes were slowly closing in the throes of death, three angels swooped into his location and landed beside him. Although his eyes were blurry and unseeing, he could still hear them.

Once female voice spoke up. "Damn! Look at the state he's in. I'm glad I used sage mode in order to track him down. Had we left it a few more minutes, he may have passed away completely."

Itachi felt another's hand move over his chest, just above his heart. "We need to do the transfer now. He's not gonna make it if we wait another minute." She confirmed as she pressed down on his chest, and he felt warmth overwhelm his cold body.

Soft hands covered his eyes and a young girlish voice stated with concern. "I will hold his soul here until the procedure is over."

"Right, let's start the transfer." The first voice commanded while Itachi swiftly fell into unconsciousness, fully expecting to join his parents in the bowels of hell.

Such was his surprise when he blinked open his eyes again only to see the stalagmites of a cave above him. / *I'm alive?* / he thought to

himself in curiosity. / *Wha? How am I alive?/*

"I see you're awake. Good, that means the transfer worked." A young girl with short violet hair and piercing purple eyes stood before Itachi and gazed down on him with slightly concerned eyes. / *Dokudes... /* Itachi's mind immediately supplied having remembered those vibrant purple eyes only belonged to the famed poison handling family.

Although he tried to move his fingers and jaws, his body refused to react. Frustrated Itachi had to utilise chakra but he could only flinch at the pain that move inflicted.

"Don't move or try to use chakra yet. Your new body and you mind isn't yet fully synchronised." Seeing confusion in Itachi's eyes, Seiko decided to explain further. "You're body was dying, Itachi-san. And there was nothing we could do to save it without resulting in our own untimely death. As such, we decided to take a page out of Orochimaru-teme's book and used a technique similar to his soul transfer technique. Basically, we found a compatible body and transferred your soul, memories and mind over, ensuring that you fully take over the new body as your own. You don't have to worry; the original owner of your new body is fully dead, his soul having been devoured by hell beasts. Welcome to your second life, Itachi-san."

Itachi wanted to frown or make a sound of distress but this body fought him every second, he didn't feel welcomed at all in this body. And more than that, he didn't want to use Orochimaru's disgusting techniques, even if it meant a new lease of life for himself. Noticing his distress, Seiko tried to calm the man down a bit. "This body originally belonged to a Konoha Chuunin who turned traitor, his name was Mizuki. As I stated before, his soul is gone now and the body would have rotted away had we not preserved it specifically for this reason. Mizuki has no close family or friends, so you don't have to worry about that front either."

Seiko's words did nothing to alleviate Itachi's concerns and it only made him more agitated. He wanted to know why he couldn't move.

Orochimaru had swapped bodies multiple times and was perfectly adapted to them, so how come he couldn't move in this one. Seiko having no clue what was upsetting the man and quickly ran off to get her teammate, perhaps they would have more luck in convincing the ex-Uchiha to settle down.

It didn't take long for Maya and Akiko to arrive at the cave. Maya immediately settled herself next to Itachi. Placing her hand upon his chest, she read his spirit in order to find out if anything's wrong. Upon opening her eyes, she decided to take over explanation of the situation from Seiko. "Please don't fight your body. As Seiko-san stated before, it's not fully synchronised yet. Although this technique's concept is similar to Orochimaru's, the implementation stage is very much different. Orochimaru had spent years manipulating and mutating his own body, shedding his human form to become nothing more than a snake like symbiote. He finds powerful hosts that can contain his spirit and devours their souls, forcing his entry into their body and utilising as his own. As you know, chakra is a special energy formed by combining the soul's spiritual power, and the body's physical energy. If the soul and body are in imbalance, the chakra that is formed is chaotic and cancerous in a way, eating away at the spirit and the body. If the spirit is completely eaten away, a person goes mad. If the physical body is eating away, then the body rots and decays. Due to Orochimaru's technique's forceful entry, the original body and his soul are never fully compatible. As time flows on, the body continues to rot away even while Orochimaru continues to live on inside it. Because of this imbalance, Orochimaru is forced to inhabit new bodies every 2 to 3 years, sometimes less than that depending on how weak the host body is. At the same time, Orochimaru's own spirit is splintered and dissolving with time, he just never noticed that his soul is fading away. Or he just didn't care."

"Our technique also transfers your soul into another's body. But our main priority is to ensure that the two (spirit and body) can become as compatible as possible, synchronising together as if it had been born together. In order to do that, we need to inject foreign, *neutral*

chakra into the body, letting this new chakra merge with both the spirit and body, tricking the body into thinking that the soul and chakra belonged with it, and same to with the spirit. Unfortunately, even medical chakra is unable to achieve this. The only chakra type in the known world that can do this is sage chakra. This means that until sage chakra has been injected into your body, Itachi-san, you will not be able to move it even though you're conscious." Maya patiently explained all the details. "Luckily it seems that at the very least, you're still able to blink. Now, I will need to ask for your permission to inject your body with sage chakra. Blink once for yes, or two for no. Please would you allow us to inject your body with foreign sage chakra?" Maya asked slowly.

Itachi blinked once. Of course he wanted to have a body and be able to move. Itachi wondered if this was a trick question up until he watched Maya and Seiko bowed to Akiko and left the two alone. Now that wouldn't have worried Itachi much, had Akiko not started taking her clothes off piece by piece. Let's get one thing straight, Itachi is a healthy twenty year old male. And although he had no access to this body right now does not mean he was not affected by the sight of a naked female, let alone one with such voluminous breasts. Unable to move and unable to speak, he felt completely helpless when Akiko removed the thin cloth covering his body. Had he been able to, Itachi would have flinched at the sight of his own naked body.

Now trying desperately to ignore what was happening around him, he couldn't help but wish he could actually feel Akiko's touch against his skin. He could watch but couldn't feel anything; he felt trapped in someone else's body and forced to watch as stranger initiate intimate acts. It was embarrassing as hell and sort of arousing had he the capacity to feel aroused.

Watching Itachi's eyes dart one way and then another in desperate plight, Akiko flushed as she imagined what he must be thinking now. Deciding she might as well explain the rest of it before she begins, Akiko somewhat bashfully coughed to catch his attention. "As Maya explained, you need to have sage chakra injected into your body for

you to be fully compatible with it. And unfortunately, there are only three people in the world who can attain sage chakra - Jiraiya-sama, possibly Naruto-sama and myself. To inject sage chakra into a foreign body, you need skin to skin contact; the best way is through... hum... sex... uh that is... sexual intercourse(3). Which is why we needed to ask for your permission first..." Pausing as she sat on his pale thigh, Akiko waited. "You can still refuse if you want. But this is the only way forward. Please blink once to acquisition or twice to decline."

Itachi took a long time to respond. He knew that this wasn't really much of a choice. And compared to the 2 other options, he'd much rather do this with the red-headed girl... but... but he just couldn't stomach the principle of it all. Strangely enough he didn't feel violated in any way. Instead, he felt pity for the other girl. Here she was offering her body as a sacrifice in order to save him. Was his life really worth it? But if he had refused, all their work would have been for naught. He decided there really was only one choice, and he blinked his agreement to his partner. In silence, he watched as she planted herself slowly onto his member, or at least the body's member. Once settled, he watched as she closed her eyes in concentration. What followed after left him in wonder and sparked a bit of attraction for the other shinobi.

Akiko's long hair started floating and flapping in the air, the bright red colour faded into brilliant white. Had Itachi not known about Akiko's true look, he would have thought her a real angel. In her sage form, she looked beautiful, pure and holy in a way that made him feel kind of sad for tainting her in any way. Upon opening her eyes, her pupils had disappeared leaving only whites behind. This divine being sat comfortably for a long while before she silently started to move upon his body. Shutting his eyes to the beauty of it, Itachi wished for this all to be a dream, a wonderful dream but a dream none the less. (4)

When Itachi next woke, he blinked at the familiar cave. Rolling over, he was surprised that he could now close his fish and open it to his

will. Blinking once more, he wasted no time in sitting up and looking over his body. Everything felt fine, good in fact. Spying a neat pile of folded clothes laid down beside him, he quickly got dressed, happy to have clothes on once more before deciding on venturing out of the cave to find his three savours, well, 2 savours and a possible lover.

Upon reaching the entrance of the cave, Itachi wasn't surprised at seeing all three girls sitting around a camp fire. Maya had already prepared a pot filled with stew, and upon seeing Itachi she quickly grabbed another bowl and filled his share in there. Quietly walking towards them, he sat down and gracefully accepted the bowl of food from Maya.

Conversations halted slightly at his joining the group but since he wasn't about to start up another conversation, the other three went back to discussing their own topics. "Jubei says that Kaga-san, your mother Dokudes Ryoko-sama and Touya-kun have gone to Hidden Rain Village to ascertain whether that is the actual hideout of Akatsuki and whether or not Ruri-sama is there." Maya stated and Seiko followed on, frowning slightly knowing that her own mother was back in the battle field and somewhat uncomfortable about that. "I think it's kinda dangerous to face Akatsuki with just the three of them. There are also rumours going around that there's going to be another Shinobi World War soon."

Any further conversation was halted by Itachi's sudden input. "The Hidden Rain village is the hideout for Akatsuki. But Pein is not your typical shinobi; he's going to be quite a very difficult opponent. However, that's not all they need to worry about. There's also Uchiha Madara, who is the real mastermind behind everything."

All three kunoichi's glanced at him, suddenly realising that Itachi has inside information that would have been damn helpful to their cause on taking Akatsuki down. "Damn. I forgot that you would know a lot more about Akatsuki. We'll need to get a statement from you or bring you to Konoha to..." She trailed off as Itachi flinched at the mentioning of the village.

"I don't think it's a good idea taking Itachi-san to Konoha." Akiko spoke up for the first time since Itachi's awakening. "He needs time to get use to his body, learning its limits, what it can and can't do, what techniques he can still perform and what he cannot." Glancing at Itachi's raised eyebrow, Akiko launched into further explanations to help him understand his situation better. "You no longer have the Sharingan. We simply could not implant the eye into the body without some sort of side-effect. At best, you'd end up somewhat like Hatake Kakashi, constantly having to cover the Sharingan eye up since it will not recognise the body as its master's even though the spirit is the same. At worst, you would still go blind because your Sharingan eyes have reached its limits. Before you ask, we have taken out your eyes and disposed of your body, so that Madara can't collect them off you. I hope you don't mind." Ducking down, Akiko blushed and avoided Itachi's dark eyes.

Blinking and looking away himself, Itachi thought for a moment before agreeing with their actions. "That's fine. I've already given my powers to Sasuke, and he may need my Sharingan eyes at a later stage if his own eyesight deteriorates. I have been cursing my own eyes for many years and to finally be free of it is a godsend." He admitted quietly.

"You hated your eyes? Why? It's just a bloodline ability." Seiko asked in curiosity. Being a bloodline user herself, she's always been proud of her heritage and could not understand how one would hate one's ability.

"The Sharingan drives my clansman mad with the amount of information it can store. Our brains simply aren't meant to remember so many things in such detail, at least, not just on battles and the negative aspects of life. I know of no one who ever used the Sharingan to memories parties, weddings or anything good. My clan viewed it as a tool and only ever use it for battle purposes. So you see, if a user only uses a knife to kill people, eventually, even the knife would be tainted by the souls of the dead, and the memory of its kills. Had the person use the same knife to protect people, cut up

meat for food or cut wood for shelter, the knife then becomes an all encompassing tool that can be used for a variety of reasons. I've only ever used the Sharingan for battles myself; I'm not able to stop myself from doing that anymore. So to have that option taken away from me is a relief." Itachi smiled slightly at the thought. "I will learn to use this body as my own, and I will train myself in order to perform the techniques that I use to be able to use, not depending on my previous bloodline ability. To me, it's a new lease on life, a rebirth I suppose."

"Good connotation. A rebirth indeed. You can no longer claim yourself as an Uchiha anymore because your body was not born an Uchiha. I don't know whether this means that you'll want to change your name completely or just stick with Itachi?" Maya asked curiously.

"Well..." Itachi glanced at Akiko for a split second before looking away again. "I'll think about that later."

"Hmm. Good then. We need to go soon, Maya and myself have been called back to Konoha, and I know for a fact that Maya wants to see if her future-husband's okay. You really did put Sasuke-san over the grinder didn't you, Itachi-san?" Seiko teased slightly before pulling the older, black haired girl up with her and rushed away from the other two. "Akiko-chan will stay with you to oversee your recovery. See you guys later!" Seiko waved enthusiastically before summoning forth one of Jubei's rings and stepping through the portal, pulling Maya in with her.

Itachi then found himself alone with Akiko. Before he could venture to ask any questions, Akiko interrupted. "Maya-chan's engaged with your brother. Suffice to say, he accidentally stumbled on her bathing. And as an Oniyoubu, she has an obligation to marry him now. Strange as it may seem, the two really do get along okay, so I don't foresee any problems. It was during the cleansing of the Uchiha district that your parents' ghosts used the Oniyoubu's power to send a message to Sasuke, explaining what actually happened during the Uchiha Massacre. Since then, Sasuke's changed a little. He doesn't

hate you, not really, but I don't know whether he can truly forgive you either. Maya's been helping him with that."

Blinking in astonishment, it took a few minutes for Itachi to evaluate it all. "I see, so my brother is engaged to a Kuunoki Gate Guardian... I suppose us brothers have similar tastes then." He glanced at Akiko again only to see her face flush red in embarrassment. Coughing into his hand, he decided to finally attempt to talk about what was really on his mind. "Um.. about... **last night** . Thank you... for... doing what you did... helping me get this body. I really appreciate what you have to sacrifice in order to grant me this body, and I will forever be in your debt, if there is anything you require of me, please feel free to ask and I will oblige." Itachi was messing up his speech, he knew it, but didn't know how to stop. Luckily, he was interrupted by Akiko before he could make this conversation even more awkward than it currently was.

"Um. There's one thing I forgot to mention." Her face flushed completely red to match her hair, Akiko took a deep breath before continuing on. "I'm gonna have to stick with you for the foreseeable future, because we're gonna have to... uh... do **that** ... at least once a month until you're fully compatible with your body. And even after you've completely synchronised properly with that body, you will still need regular sage chakra injections around once every six to twelve months to insure the body doesn't reject your soul, not like Orochimaru's technique." By now, she was looking at anything except Itachi.

Itachi's mouth was hanging open at the implications. He's going to have regular sex sessions with this girl for the rest of his life, as long as he continues to live. Reorganising his thoughts, Itachi suddenly realised the monumental sacrifice Akiko had taken upon her shoulders in order to save him. She's given up the ability to have a family of her own. No husband would allow their wives to sleep with other men even if it meant saving their lives. She's forever chained to him, just as he's chained to her.

"Why?" He finally asked. "Why do all this? You didn't have to. You could have just let me die."

Akiko stood and walked some way ahead leaving the warmth of the camp fire. She stopped moving and answered with her back towards Itachi. "Maya, Seiko and myself were given a mission two and a half years ago by Ruri-sama. She asked us to find a way to save your life. Yuuki-sama loved you. She loved you as she would have loved her own son, and to lose you would be like losing Yuuki-sama again. Ruri-sama wanted to save you and we would do anything to help Ruri-sama achieve her dreams. We came up with several options but this was the one we decided would work best, considering our abilities. When we explained our plans to her, she refused. She didn't want anyone to sacrifice themselves for anything but I told her it wouldn't be a sacrifice at all."

Here, Akiko paused and Itachi waited patiently for her to continue. "My body... I know you noticed the scars." Itachi nodded even though he knew she could not see him. "Well... suffice to say I'm no innocent. My body's been damaged long ago, and I can't have the kind of relationship normal people do. It's not the physical aspect; I simply can't connect on a spiritual, mental and emotional level to people. I would never marry, could never marry, not in the traditional sense of the word. I didn't mind tying myself to you, if it was only physically and with the purpose of transferring sage chakra to keep you alive. I can live with that; for it's as close as I can come to a real relationship."

For a long moment, neither spoke nor moved. Eventually, Itachi pulled himself to his feet and moved towards the other girl. Standing behind her, he pulled her back to his chest in a comforting embrace. "I would marry you in a heart bit. We'll be each other's crutch, for I too, do not believe I would ever be able to connect well with another. That's the price we pay as shinobis. Our lives are harsh and often short, only the lucky few live to form families. I've been given a second chance and I hope... one day, I can live this life to the fullest."
(5)

Upon arriving to Konoha, Maya left Seiko to report to Jiraiya and Jubei while she quickly made her way towards her new home – the redeveloped Uchiha district. She had a distinct feeling that Sasuke had arrived home and need consolidation. Not to mention, depending on his mood, her news about Itachi could uplift him or depress him, so she need to see him for herself first before deciding whether she should tell him anything.

Opening the house's front door, Maya nodded to her mother in respect and she inturn pointed her head towards Sasuke's bedroom. Knowing that it meant her future husband had returned home and had most probably locked himself in his room again, this meant that Maya had better make her appearance as soon as possible before he fell into yet another inconsolable state of depression as he is prone to do whenever he over thinks about his family. Entering the bedroom, she saw a mould of blankets in the middle of the bed and sighed. Sometimes, Sasuke really does act like a child.

Pulling the covers away slowly, Maya was heartbroken to find Sasuke underneath, with dried tear marks down his face, trying desperately to hide from the world. There she sat and waited.

"He left... He left me again..." Turning away slightly, Sasuke closed his eyes, trying to will away the pain of abandonment once more. "Why... why does he do this... always?"

Taking a deep breath, she answered as best she could. "I don't know, Sasuke. But I do know... he loved you. He must have... And deep down in your heart... you also know this." Pausing for a big, Maya let those words sink in. "I have a confession to make." She admitted quickly.

Opening his eyes to gaze at his intended, Sasuke stayed silent waiting for Maya to explain. "Akiko, Seiko and I were sent out on a mission to track Itachi down. We succeeded."

Sasuke immediately sat up. "He's here? In Konoha?"

Maya shook her head quickly. "No, he was badly injured." Turning away, Maya gave him a short description of the state she had found Itachi in. "It was obvious disease had been eating away at him from the inside for a long time. His organs were barely functioning, and his heart erratic. It must have been extremely painful, so he must have known his time was running out. Seiko found evidence of him taking all sorts of drugs and medicine to keep himself alive, and or numbing the pain enough for him to move. He seemed to have developed a rare type of cancer that is eating away at his organs, which spread the damage over the years. The drugs he took probably helped at first but with the multitude of different medicine he had ingested, they fought one another and in the end became ineffective. He was dying, Sasuke. In fact, we were very surprised he wasn't dead weeks ago when we finally found him collapsed on the floor like that. Even then, he stayed mostly conscious through the excruciating pain through will alone." Smiling sadly through her masked face, Maya could not help but show admiration. "Even then, all he could think about... was you... and Ruri-sama."

"Did he... Is he...?" Sasuke couldn't bring himself to believe that his unstoppable brother, his impossibly strong brother could be that weak and vulnerable. He simply could not imagine Itachi as anything other than the powerful ninja in the man's youth. As his thoughts drifted, the familiar pain of betrayal, abandonment infused with anger and hate resurfaced and Sasuke had a hard time tapping those rampant emotions down.

"He's not dead, although it was a close thing. We had to transfer his soul into another body. He's going to have to spend the next few months getting use to it." Maya noticed the varying emotions flashing through Sasuke's eyes, and gave her intended a light squeeze on his shoulder in support. "I do not believe he will ever return to Konoha, Sasuke. Although he loves the village, he could not bear to live with the guilt of what he has done, the memories and the ghosts will follow him."

A quiet knock on their door interrupted the couple's thoughts. "Sasuke. Maya-chan. Jiraiya-sama, Jubei-sama, and Seiko-san are here asking to have a conference with you. Are you willing to see them?" Maya's mother asked politely.

Rubbing any residue tears from his eyes, Sasuke pulled himself out of bed. "Yeah, we'll be done in a minute." Cleaning himself up slightly, Sasuke makes his way to the door with Maya following not far behind.

"I take it you've been informed about Itachi being alive and somewhat in our custody." Jiraiya went straight to the point.

Sasuke nodded but kept his expression as blank as possible.

"I see. Sasuke, I need your permission." Jiraiya stated shortly after.

Raising an eyebrow in confusion, Sasuke asked. "Permission for what, Jiraiya-sama?"

"I need your permission to let Itachi live, just so I can interrogate him about Akatsuki and Danzo." Jiraiya answered.

"Wha?" Sasuke's stunned expression said it all.

Sighing at the situation, Jiraiya explained more thoroughly. "Look kid. Itachi, regardless of orders, did the deed and caused the death of all your relatives. You have every right to want him dead. And I won't take that from you. However, no matter how much you look at it, Itachi is far more useful alive than dead. He has information, detailed information mind you, on Akatsuki, on Uchiha Madara (who is also an accomplice during the Uchiha Massacre), and I have a strong feeling Itachi had been neck deep in controversy and secret dealings with Danzo and the other advisors. As such, he could provide us intelligence that is critical for the war against Akatsuki as well as writing the wrong for the past by providing evidence against those three old cronies and getting rid of them once and for all. This is a

chance in a lifetime to destabilise their powerbase, get rid of them altogether and start afresh by creating a Konoha we can all be proud of. So what say you, Sasuke? If you still wish for Itachi's death, I won't stop you. But please heed my words, hatred only begets more hatred." Jiraiya gazed sadly down at the boy for some time, thinking about his own past and those of his previous students. "At some point, someone has to take a stance and stop the cycle of hate. Or else the pain will never stop."

Sasuke remained silent for a short period of time before sighing. "I don't want him to die. I know it's hard to believe, but... Katono-sensei once told me that a heart drenched in hate and mind that thinks of only vengeance would lead to nothing but regret. An avenger hates so deeply is because they cannot let go of their love. Forgiveness is the hardest thing anyone could ever decide to do." Nodding in remembrance at those words, Sasuke gazed sadly at Jiraiya. "Even in death, he never found atonement. I... don't want to be like that." He finally decided, and it was certainly a turning point in his life.

"So no, I don't want Itachi dead either."

A few long minutes of silence ensued before Jiraiya nodded. "Thank you." Turning to Jubei, he immediately launched into the reason why he was here in the first place. "Jubei, can you contact Akiko. I want the information that Itachi holds right now. Time is of the essence after all."

Jubei nodded in return before lifting his delicate looking left hand. Instantly, one of the small rings on his index finger floating up into the air and started spinning. As it spun, the metallic ring started expanding in size until eventually it was the size of two basketballs. Suddenly, it stopped spinning and a simmering, liquid-like effect happened in the centre of the ring. Once the vision in between ring stopped simmering, Akiko's face could clearly be seen.

"Yo, Jubei-san. What's hanging?" Akiko's cheerful response lifted the mood in the room somewhat.

"I've got some questions for Itachi, if you think he's up to them."
Jiraiya interrupted, completely focussed on getting what he wants.

"Okay, ask away." Akiko's face disappeared from the ring-mirror and instead the face of a young man in his early to mid thirties with white hair was presented.

"Mizuki-sensei?" Sasuke couldn't help but ask, having recognised the once Chuunin-sensei that had taught him a long time ago.

"That's not Mizuki. It's Itachi. Mizuki turned out to be a traitor working for Orochimaru. When the snake died, he decided to try his luck and steal Konoha's scroll of forbidden seals. He was caught and was going to be executed but Jubei here decided there's a much better use for his body than to burn it to ash." Jiraiya explained somewhat, having completely forgotten to fill Sasuke in on this little tidbit of truth.

"Hello, little brother. Jiraiya-sama, Jubei-san, Maya-san." There was no mistaking the tone and manner in which Itachi always calls his younger brother. Sasuke knew straight away that this was his brother, regardless of looks and age.

"You wish to ask me something, Jiraiya-sama." Itachi prompted with no annoyance, glad that he could see his brother's shocked but recovering face once more.

"Yeah, tell me all you have about Akatsuki; their members and abilities. What are Madara's plans and his abilities, all that you know. Next, tell me everything you know about Orochimaru and that bastard Danzo." Jiraiya immediately replied.

Itachi nodded, somewhat distracted by his new and course white hair. "I don't know what Madara's secret plan is. He's only ever confided with Zetsu, whom I believe is a creature created by Madara himself. However I can tell all I know about the other members, which I admit may seem somewhat lacking in certain details." Itachi spent the next few hours going over each of the abilities of the members of Akatsuki.

Itachi mentioned the existence of Konan and Pein, who struck Jiraiya deeply as his once thought dead students. Itachi explained that although he knew the individual abilities of the six Pein's, he had never met the original and didn't know what the man looked like. But since Jiraiya knew there was only one member of his students that had the Rinnegan, it wasn't rocket science to realise that Nagato had to be the real Pein, the only question is why. For a moment, Jiraiya almost regretted not going to the Hidden Rain Village himself and confronting his former students, however, after thinking about it logically, he probably wouldn't have the heart to kill them anyway. Like master, like student, and Jiraiya admitted to himself he may be a little too similar in nature to Sarutobi – the Sandaime Hokage.

"Damn, this information would have been useful to Kaga and other prior to them heading off to face Akatsuki in the Hidden Rain." Jiraiya muttered beneath his breath.

"Doesn't matter, I can relay this information to Kaga via one of my rings. I can even do it right after this meeting." Jubei answered confidently.

Itachi informed the group that Deidara was alive, and that he was teamed up with the disguised Madara. He went into a detailed report on what Madara was capable of, and disclosed shocking news about how Madara had been raiding the Uchiha clan for their eyes for years, and utilised them for his own selfish purposes. Sasuke especially was infuriated by what he was hearing.

When Itachi started talking about the abilities of his former partner – Hoshigaki Kisame, Jiraiya interrupted, informing the former Nukenin that the ex-Mist ninja was pronounced dead.

"I highly doubt that, Jiraiya-sama. Kisame is a resilient fighter, a true shinobi. I should know, having been his partner for over 5 years. The only way that Kisame will truly die is if he wills it himself." Itachi's haunting words made Jiraiya hesitant about his own beliefs on the report of Kisame's death.

After that, Itachi started informing the group about his investigation into Danzo. And again, the rest were shocked that Danzo too had raided some Uchiha corpses in order to attain the power of the Sharingan eye. However, other than that and Danzo's hold on the secretive Root Anbu division, even Itachi did not know the true depth of Danzo's treachery.

"That's good enough for now anyway. If there was some way for me to prove to the Daimyo of what Danzo's been conspiring behind the backs of the Hokage. Even that old guy will have no choice but to sack him and move him from his post. Once Danzo is without political backing, it's easy to send an assassin after him. Once he's gone, then I can start working on merging the Root Anbu division into the real Anbu." Sighing and shaking his head slightly at the enormity of what he had recently heard, Jiraiya silently agreed with himself that there was still a lot of work to do.

It was somewhat late at night when the conference ended with Jiraiya and Juubei leaving to plan what they should do next, Maya and Sasuke to stay and savour some peace and quiet, Akiko and Itachi to stay hidden and recuperate.

Ruri opened her eyes and barely suppressed a yawn of boredom. Turning to look right and then left, she decided that nope, nothing had changed since the last time she checked. She was still trapped with both her arms pulled to both sides and held up by strange vines or giant plant roots, not dissimilar to the ones that could be summoned forth by the first Hokage. Her legs too, were tied together and held trapped by large and ugly greenish-brown roots. Suddenly, a swirling of air illusion appeared before her and soon, the form of Uchiha Madara – still wearing his infamous mask – emerged.

"I'm surprised you haven't killed me yet." Ruri stated nonchalantly, as if she had expected this whole thing to happen from the very beginning.

"You are useful, I don't doubt that. What I doubt was Pein's power over you. That doesn't mean I don't have a use for you either." Madara stated calmly from behind his mask. "I want to know the truth."

"The truth?" Ruri stated, one eyebrow rising in curiosity.

"There is a stone monument passed down amongst the Uchiha for generations. Upon it are recorded the secrets left to us by the Rikudou Sennin." Madara started his story. "Without the Sharingan, it is impossible to read. What's more, the Mangekyou Sharingan can decode more than the Sharingan, and the Rinnegan still more than that. You of all people should know why the Rikudou Sennin became the stuff of legends, worshipped by the shinobi world almost like a god."

Ruri nodded, having learnt of this story since she was a child. "Yes. The Rikudou Sennin saved the world from an indestructible monster. It all started with the being which was the original fusion of all the current bijous - a being possessed of the ultimate chakra - the Juubi. The Ichibi through to Kyuubi are nothing more than beings created from the divided chakra of the Juubi by the Rikudou Sennin. So! What exactly do you want to know?" She asked but only to be interrupted by Madara who wanted to finish his story his way.

"The Rikudou Sennin developed a certain Ninjutsu in order to protect the world from the Juubi. Even now, that Ninjutsu, the seals that created Jinchuriki - are still being quietly passed down. The Rikudou Sennin was the Juubi Jinchuuriki. In order to suppress its power, he sealed the Juubi into his own body." Madara paused for effect, not that Ruri gave much care.

"As the man who freed the world from the terrible Juubi, the Sennin was worshipped like a god by the people. But the Juubi's chakras was so massive and so foul that if the Jinchuriki were to die, it would escape the seal and terrorise the world once more. Fearing this, upon the deathbed, the Rikudou Sennin used the last of his power to divide the Juubi's chakra into nine portions and scatter them across

the world's surface. And with that chakra removed, its actual body was sealed away and blasted into the sky, where its power could not reach us. It became the moon." Madara finished slowly.

"And... what do you want to know?" Ruri repeated somewhat impatiently.

"Was all that was said on the monument the truth?" Madara finally asked.

"You doubt your ancestor's words?" Ruri enquired curiously, surprised that this ancient fossil doubted his own clan's history, considering he was the one that was obsessed with it from the very beginning.

"I want to know the whole truth. Who was the man called the Uzumaki leader? Was he the Rikudou Sennin? Why does the two historical records look so similar and yet, to the Kuunoki, the Uzumaki leader turned his back on the world and closed his village away, while the rest of history state that Rikudou Sennin continued his journey to liberate human kind and created the Shinobi world that we all know. Why didn't the Uchiha records ever mention anything about the demonic DNA sequence in our bloodstream and why did it not mention any of the lower class demons, just the Juubi. Why did the Uzumaki records include both the Juubi and Kyuubi as destruction gods, when one is a division of the other? Answer me, Uzumaki Ruri, as the last member of the Uzumaki Prophet house?" Madara clarified, his voice echoing in the empty underground chamber.

Ruri smiled grimly at him, impressed that he had been so thorough in his research of history. "You're well informed." She would have saluted the man, but her hands were tied. "Did you gain this information from the interrogation you made on Uzumaki Kushina (6)? Or... Did you get this information from my uncle, Uzumaki Tenka(7)? Curious man, aren't you."

Behind his mask, Madara narrowed his eyes. "It seems you are just as informed as I am, perhaps more so."

Ruri raised her head in defiance and pride. "Of course, I was after all the Lady Oracle. What kind of Oracle would I be if I couldn't see far into the past and understand what's coming in the future. To tell you the truth, my Yochigan was far more advanced than my uncles and his uncle before him. Had the Kuunoki survived, and I died, my soul would have definitely become part of the life stream and formed the eighth high councillors. I am indebted to Pein for freeing me from that fate."

"Indebted or not, answer my questions." Madara demanded, finally showing his true temper.

Ruri smirked, taking her time to answer his questions. "Is the Rikudou Sennin the same man as the Uzumaki leader? Yes and No. Both histories recorded by the Uchiha and the Kuunoki are correct. What you have to understand is that there was only one Rikudou Sennin... But there have been *many* Uzumaki leaders."

Pausing for effect, Ruri continued. "The Rikudou Sennin adopted two boys in his travels. The eldest was your ancestor, Uchiha. The younger was Senju, the forefather of your greatest rival. Both boys were born Hanyous, abandoned by society at the time and abused on a daily basis. The Rikudou Sennin only picked them up because he felt sorry for them. What you didn't know was that the Rikudou Sennin had his own children, pure Uzumaki children born from a peasant woman and the most powerful Jinchuriki in the world. When the Rikudou Sennin decided to try to follow his foolish dreams to 'save the world' after successfully sealing a destruction god into his own body, his children disagreed and eventually deserted him to his journey. They became the next Uzumaki leader, and closed the gates. This was not recorded on the Uchiha taper stone because it happened some years before the Rikudou Sennin even picked up the two boys and adopted them into his family."

"Even though the new Uzumaki leader disagreed with his father and kicked him out of the Kuunoki, that didn't mean the two men completely stopped communicating with each other. He knew exactly when the Rikudou Sennin was dying, and he knew what had befallen the two boys who had turned into such monsters of war. Just as was predicted, human nature cannot escape the beast that is within them, especially two powerful bloodlines who descended from the demons they so hate." Ruri taunted subtly at Madara's accursed blood. "You believe that you were fated to be filled with hate, with vengeance and a lust for power. In a way, you are right. But it has nothing to do with the Rikudou Sennin's choice of successful, the truth is, it's in your very blood, your demonic blood."

"Quiet!" Madara snapped suddenly, hateful of how the women demeaned his clan's pride and history. Yes, his family may have roots in demon breeding, but none the less, they were powerful and so should always be respected. "Now answer the rest of my questions!" He demanded with a strong voice.

"Hmmm." Ruri grinned in retaliation. "Why didn't the Uchiha records ever mention anything about the demonic DNA sequence in your hated bloodstream and why did it not mention any of the lower class demons, just the Juubi. How the hell should I know?" She taunted whimsically. "Maybe, like you, they were ashamed of their demonic background, afraid that the rest of the world would learn about their deep dark secret and start looking at them as nothing more than replacements of demons. After all, in that era, demons were hunted and killed by any means necessary. Even a demon cannot face hundreds of human hunters and live to see the next day."

"Stop your incessant battle, woman and answer my last question!" Madara's patience had snapped some time ago.

Grinning unrepentantly, Ruri continued in a sing-song voice. "The Uzumaki records include both the Juubi and Kyuubi as destruction gods, because the title is well deserved. While the other Bijuu were all smaller, almost random aspects of the once great and powerful ten-tailed god, Kyuubi retained its memories and it lived true to its

nature. Kyuubi was born in the instant that the Juubi was ripped apart. Suffice to say it was a violent birth, and one that gave instant consciousness and understanding to the beast that is known as the nine tailed Kitsune. Kyuubi is an ancient, and although it has served **forcefully** under you for a few brief moments in its long lifetime, it still remained true to its nature. One so old deserves to be called a destruction god."

Madara glared hatefully at Ruri from behind his mask. She had waffled on and on about Kyuubi's characteristics as if Madara himself had no clue about his own pet, but in the full minute speech, there was absolutely no substance as to why the Uzumaki truly refers to the Kyuubi as a destruction god. She was wasting his time. "I could very well break you, the way I broke Kushina and your dear old uncle." He threatened.

"Aha ha ha ha ha!" Ruri laughed abruptly, clearly having no fear of his threats. "You didn't break Kushina, you killed her... Same too with my uncle Tenka. Uzumaki Kushina was a distant cousin of mine who had been a resident of the branch Uzumaki Breed house that established themselves in the land of whirlpools. She was chosen to be the next Jinchuriki for the Kyuubi because of her strength of will power. She would never break, not in a million years. My uncle Tenka, too, had long anticipated that you would finally go after the Uzumaki Prophet house, and had deliberately made himself a target in order to keep me safe. Everything went according to plan; I knew every move you made even before you make them." She taunted back without regret.

"That's a lie!" Madara denounced. "Had you known what I planned, your dearly beloved sister would have lived." He supported his claim with a direct attack at one of Ruri's only weaknesses – the death of Yuuki.

Immediately, Ruri stopped laughing and glared at the man instead. "Even Yuuki's death was in my calculations. From the very beginning, you've been played Madara." She stated coldly, her eyes suddenly as stone cold as ice. "Many years ago, even before the

forming of Konoha, Senju Harashima found the Kuunoki. As a descendant of the Rokudo Sennin and a younger adopted brother to the original Uzumaki clan, he asked Uzumaki Mokutaku (8) (the leader of the Uzumaki clan at the time) if they would be willing to form an alliance with the Senju, and create a whole new village – Konoha. But the Uzumaki leader declined. Instead, he allowed various members of the Uzumaki Breed house to leave the Kuunoki and form a neutral state – later known as the Whirlpool country, which was allied to Senju Harashima. Not only that, he allowed one of his younger nieces Uzumaki Mito to marry into the Senju line. Again strengthening the Senju while ignoring the Uchiha."

"However, there were rules to the building of this new country." Ruri continued in a bland and emotionless voice, as if reminiscing the past. "The new line of Uzumaki who lived there must carry a different symbol to the Kuunoki. While the Kuunoki is a dot within a circle, within another circle – each isolated and disparate, the new Uzumaki breed house used a spiral, where the lines once more connect the body, with the soul and its essence, it's a connection that reflects the tentative relationship between the Uzumaki and the rest of the world. Soon after, Senju raised his hand to Uchiha and eventually Konoha was born. We of the Prophet house knew then that you would betray Senju and send in the Kyuubi. We placed one of our own strategically in line just to intercept your plans."

"When Uzumaki Mito was dying, my uncle Tenka allowed Kushina to join Konoha to become the next Kyuubi Jinchuriki. We offered her up as a sacrifice because she was the strongest of us all. The rest of the Uzumaki had been ordered to return to the Kuunoki. Those that did not immediately come back (there were many) were soon killed and their bodies brought back to the Kuunoki by the then gate guardians to remerge with the life stream, or they scattered only to be hunted down by our own people. We are a cruel clan, cruellest to our own." Ruri admitted, and it was true. The Uzumaki, though not exactly power hungry, were obsessed about controlling themselves, more so than the Hyuuga ever did. Why, because they feared their own power, and they feared what they were capable of. With this

fear, it felt safer to give oneself chains and rules to abide by, to create false gods in order to judge one's actions. It was safer to be alone, to ensure that one cannot hurt others around them.

"When Kushina was kidnapped by ninjas of the Hidden Cloud Village, we had been keeping an eye out on her. Even then Minato had loved her, and was not far off her trail. That is... until you interfered (9), killed the Kumo Ninjas and took Kushina away, giving Minato no clue as to where she went. He spent years searching her, never quite giving up. We knew he was the key to stopping you. And because you got rid of Kushina, we had to send someone else in to replace. Yuuki was the only choice I had left but she was not ready. In the interim we sent in Dokudes Hina to act as a mediator and keep an eye out on your activities. We knew that there was no way you could extract the Kyuubi from Kushina as she was still too young. You needed her to be pregnant and only during childbirth would the seal weaken in order for you to extract the demon out."

"Hmp. So you watched indifferently as I put her in status for the rest of her life, artificially impregnated her with a child before finally extracting the demon and killing her in the process? My, you Uzumaki's are cruel, letting one of your own endure such pain and trauma for so many years without doing anything about it." Madara stated snidely, finally having a comeback to use against Ruri.

"And this coming from the man who almost single-handedly killed off every member of his clan..." Ruri rebutted calmly, before turning her expression back into the past. "Kushina was lost to us. But we knew you were less than happy with the catch. You wanted a member of the Prophet house, and so my uncle made himself conveniently available."

"Che. Uzumaki Tenka died before I could extract the information I wanted from him." Madara snorted inelegantly. "Even his mind was completely wiped clean of memories – probably a memory destroying seal. I thought by extracting his soul and implanting it into Nagato with his fully developed eyes, I would be able to get the information I want from that avenue, or at least have access to the

famed Yochigan. But upon awakening, Nagato had no memories from the life lived as Uzumaki Tenka, only vague knowledge of techniques, most of which he couldn't even perform. And instead of the Yochigan's bright golden rings I instead found myself facing the blank purple irises of the Rinnegan."

"Of course, Yochigan is a technique developed by fusing ones soul and body with the life stream. Without that connection, it will never work. But the Rinnegan is something passed down through our line as the birth children of the Rikudou Sennin. We never successfully evolved our eyes into Rinnegan because we never had the practice of removing one's eye and implanting into another. If we had to go blind so be it. That's the difference between the Uzumaki and Uchiha. We are each willing to become a sacrifice for the betterment of others, while the Uchiha would willingly sacrifice each other for one's own gain. Such selfish creatures, filled with hate and anger – these are your fate as children of the Shinei no Tori (Death Birds) (10)."

Yah, another chapter done.

(1) Rensa Ahiru, one of the Original Characters introduced in Restoration of Faith . She and her team mates Jikizuka Tsubame and Iwama Uzura all became Chuunins upon recommendation after the Kuunoki chuunin exams. Tsubame eventually worked her way up to become Iwa's high administrator, helping the Tsuchikage in the day-to-day running of Iwagakure. Iwama Uzura earned his jounin rank recently and is currently working as a HunterNin for Iwagakure, hoping to capture his late uncle – Deidara, and clear the name of his family. Ahiru had worked her way up to jounin status as well as if proving to be one of the strongest young shinobis to come out of Iwa in recent years. Her strength is comparable to Kurotsuchi's (the Tsuchikage's own granddaughter) who is almost 8 years Ahiru's senior.

(2) Kapasu Juro appeared really briefly last chapter and a few chapters before that. He's now obsessed with hunting down

Hoshigaki Kisame for revenge. In the last chapter, it was implied that he killed Kisame but we don't know whether that's true or not.

(3) YES! That is right. Don't look at me like that; I've been planning this from the very beginning.

(4) No, I will NOT be writing the sex scene out. You've got imaginations, use them. I'm blushing as all hell just typing this up. I just don't do romance or... sex...

(5) There you go, it's as mushy as I can make it. ItachixOC! For some odd reason, I really like this pairing. ^_^

(6) Yes, I'm including Kushina's character in this story, but remember SHE IS NOT NARUTO'S MOTHER, and she will not play a very big role in the overall storyline.

(7) Uzumaki Tenka, former head of the Prophet house, uncle to both Ruri and Yuuki, brother to Uzumaki Rika and teacher to Kaga. He disappeared many years ago, which resulted in Ruri taking up the mantle of being the new Prophet house leader at the age of 14.

(8) See the Uzumaki clan profile on my website. Uzumaki Mokutaku and Uzumaki Kintaku were bothers, one become the leader of the Prophet house and the other a member of the Breed house. After them is Uzumaki Tenka and Uzumaki Rika. After them is the current set of Uzumaki Ruri and Uzumaki Yuuki.

(9) This is where the originally story deviates from the Canon series. I thought to myself – what if Minato never found Kushina, what if he never rescued her.

(10) Something I made up. It was the chapter of when Sasuke declared that his group will be known from this point forth as 'Hawk' instead of 'Snake'. Then I realised, Itachi has a thing for crows and Sasuke how has a thing for 'hawk'. The pictures draped on both sides of the historical Uchiha monument also reminds me of birds.

So why not make it that the Uchiha worship birds because they are descended of ancient bird-like demons!

Sorry. I wanted to include the fight scene between Kaga and Pein this chapter but it became too long. So I cut it out. It should hopefully be in the next one.

Hope you enjoy!

Scenes VI

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 10: Scenes VI

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

" **Demon's talk** ", / *Thoughts* /, "Speech", ' *Speech emphasis* ', (*FLASHBACK*), Titles , (***Author's interruptions***)

I'm not going to provide any excuses for the long... LONG delay. Just read and let me know what you think. The fight scenes took a long time to develop, so I hope you appreciate it.

Chapter 10

(Hidden Rain Village)

A hand rose slowly out of a shadowed corner deep in an alleyway full of trash and boxes. A head followed the hand, and slowly, the rest of the body emerged. Kaga quietly gazed around his surroundings, making sure no one noticed his presence, even while light rain dripped onto his bandage covered head. With a flick of his wrist, he called out his companions to emerge as well. Silent as the night, Dokudes Ryoko (matron of the Dokudes clan) and Kataichi Touya (older brother of a member of the Kuunoki Gate Guardians, and

servant to Uzumaki Ruri) materialised out of the shadow gate that Kaga had formed.

Without looking at his fellow Shinobis, Kaga muttered quietly. "This place sure has changed over the years. The last time I was here was when I was in my teens. They didn't have all those sky scrapers and buildings. I never thought that Hanzo the Salamander would go for such structures."

"I don't think Hanzo is still in power. Don't forget Pein is here in these vicinities. We must gather information as fast as possible, including the location of Ruri-sama." Ryoko reminded Kaga, completely focused on the mission in front of her.

Kaga nodded in silence before he turned back and slowly merged back into the shadows behind him. "I'll find and collect some *willing* informants. Wait here." He completely disappeared.

"What's wrong Pein?" Konan asked in a quiet voice, having noticed the slight twitch in her companion's eyes.

"Someone has disturbed my rain's fall. And judging from their chakra it is someone dangerous." Pausing for a few seconds, Pein remedied his statement. "My mistake, there are three."

"Konan, when I stop the rain, use your Jutsu to find these intruders." Pein ordered in a firm voice, neither too demanding nor loud.

"Understood. Leave it to me." Konan nodded and closed her eyes. As she stood still, her body slowly de-materialised into thousands of slips of white paper floating in to the air. Each individual piece folded into itself until the formed a shape like a butterfly. Fluttering in the wind now deceased of any rain, these thousands upon thousands of paper butterflies spread in all direction, sensing for the foreign chakra of their enemies.

"What a heavy rainfall..." muttered a man (1) in his heavy rain-soaked coat and straw hat, as he stood moodily under an alcove to avoid the heavy rainfall.

"Yeah, how about we go find a place to have a drink and escape this rain for a bit?" His partner commiserated.

The first man grimaced. "This is the bottom level, there's nothing here. All the shops and bars are above us." He retorted unhappily.

Unbeknownst to the two men, a pair of hands emerged from the shadows behind them, the hands quickly and efficiently wrapped around their months, stopping them from screaming in sudden fright and pulled them into the shadows. In no more than a split second later, both men were gone.

When the men awoke, they found themselves stripped half-naked (only with pants on) and with both arms tied up with chains high above their heads. Their feet did not touch the black marble ground, which made them notice the pain in their arms and shoulders as they hang from a non-existent roof that was so far above their heads and shrouded in darkness that they couldn't see where the ends were. Looking around, they found themselves in a hallway of sorts, black tinted windows on each side with the corridors stretching into eternity on both ends. In front of them was a strange green leather couch of which sat three figures. On the right was a man clothed completely in black and had bandages wrapped around his face, ensuring that no one could recognise him. In the middle was a woman wearing tight fitting brown leather clothes, but shaped in a way to allow her free movement, her purple hair was tied high in a ponytail resting in a long braid. On the left was a tall but lanky looking teenager with scars and scratch marks all over his arms and legs. The teen wore strange chains around his wrists and his ankles.

"Ryoko. Could you please start the interrogation?" The black clan man spoke. In response, the women rose from the leather couch elegantly and stepped towards the prisoners rather threateningly.

As if finally realising what situation they found themselves in, the two prisoners started pulling on their arm restraints and attempting to kick their legs out in an attempt to free themselves, only to find their arms completely trapped above them and that their legs were completely paralysed. At this point, they panicked.

"Let us go! What do you want from us?" "Whatever it is, we won't tell you what you want, so you might as well kill us now!"

"We want to know about Pein. We want to know where he is keeping Ruri-sama." The youngest of the three spoke.

Upon hearing the mention of the name 'Pein', both men immediately turned stubborn in their silence. "Kill us. We won't betray Pein-sama. No matter what you do."

The teenage male sighed. "Looks like we'll have to do things the hard way." Turning to his other two compatriots, Touya asked: "Ryoko-sama, I'll leave this to you. Kaga-san, could you let me outside. I'll do some reconnaissance around the village while you interrogate the prisoners. I've never much liked torture myself."

Kaga, the black clad man nodded. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a decorated door frame and door rose from the ground right in front of Touya. The door opened and beyond it, the two captives could see the familiar site of their home village. Without any further words, Touya walked through the door and it closed behind him. Before the door completely shut, Kaga called out to the boy. "Remember to call me if you meet up with trouble." Once the door had shut, the door and door frame phased out of existence, disappearing into the black marble floor.

This scene troubled the two prisoners deeply, finally understanding that they were trapped in some sort of alternate dimension, unable to escape. Their only hope is to have someone notice their disappearance and launch a rescue operation – highly unlikely considering they were two very low ranking ninjas. And the only other hope is that they die soon without spilling any information.

"Let's do this." Without giving the men any further warning, Ryoko swiftly struck one man with a tiny sewing needle into the base of the back of his skull. The reaction was instant. The man screamed at the top of his lungs, all available muscles in his body ranging from his facial muscles all the way down to his toes twitched sporadically as if an electrical surge was passing through his blood channels in constant bursts. The sound was horrific, the sight of his body contracting and shaking in seizure-like manner even more horrendous, but Ryoko kept twisting the tiny needle in place, unheeded by the sight and sound of the tortured man before her.

For 30 long seconds, she kept it up. Finally, she pulled the tiny needle out, and the man collapsed on himself, his body completely soaked in sweat and his breath coming in gasps. He looked beyond tired, pale and sickly. "That was a pain nerve. Now, let's try something else." Ryoko lowered the needle and pushed it into the lower-left hand side of the man's back, just below the man's ribs. Again, the reaction was instant. But instead of a pained scream, the man laughed wildly and uncontrolled. He laughed so hard and so fast, he could barely breathe. His fingers, arms and legs twitched in reaction to the constant ticklish sensation that ran through his body. He wanted to escape desperately but was unable to. Again, the torture lasted for 30 seconds, 30 seconds too long.

By the end, the man looked even more exhausted than when he lived through the first 30 seconds of pain. This time, his face was completely red from the effort of laughing so loud. Breath was also difficult to come by, and his muscles ached all over from surviving through both sensations.

"Pain... and pleasure... I could alternate between the two sensations for hours on end. Or I could press them both at the same time. Can you imagine what that would be like?" Ryoko stated in cold, soft voice. "But if you tell me what I want to know, then you're free to go."

Watching in terror as his friend was tortured before him, the other man tried to put on a brave face. "Don't give in! Even if we're just common soldiers, we're still shinobis of this village! We'll never

betray a comrade! Don't take us lightly! Go ahead and do your worst, but we won't talk!"

The tortured man only shuddered and moaned in fear of the prospect of continuing torture, desperately trying to shield himself away from Ryoko's cool gaze without any success. Ryoko's attention then turned to the one who spoke. "Perhaps it's your turn then. I can always leave the needle in your body, pressing directly on the pain nerve and the laughter nerve while I concentrate on something else."

The moment Ryoko took a single step towards the out-spoken man, his expression immediately changed to panic. "Uh... maybe we can discuss this..." He squeaked. "In a rational manner... please?"

"Where is Pein? Where is Ruri?" This time, it was Kaga that spoke, his voice strong and unwavering.

Sweating in nervousness, the man stuttered as he spoke. "I've heard that... that Pein-sama stays in the tallest tower... on the west part of town..."

"Heard?" Ryoko queried in a threatening tone.

"The truth is no one really knows anything about Pein-sama." The man uttered truthfully. "They say he's a member of the Fuuma clan... But no one can say for sure what he looks like. And there are rumours that he doesn't even exist. In this town, Pein-sama is like a God. It doesn't matter if he's actually here or not. He gives us his protection either way. If there's ever a festival or any kind of event, the specifics always come from a messenger." The more the man spoke, the less Ryoko understood. Sure, they now knew that Pein was a heartless man, willing and able to destroy many lives, no matter how distant their blood ties to the old Hanzo, nor how young the victims were. But other than that, the information provided was useless.

Sighing in annoyance, Ryoko cut the interrogation off abruptly by knocking both prisoners out cold. "They're useless." She determined.

"It's probably best to bring their bodies back to Konoha so that one of the mind walkers can travel through their memories and find some significant information. We won't be getting anywhere the way we were going." Kaga nodded in acceptance.

He tensed suddenly. "Touya's in trouble." He stated.

Touya had been walking aimlessly around town, doing his best to avoid being seen by people. The rain had stopped and it seemed to be a fine day. But he couldn't help but feel as if he's being watched. / *Better keep my wits about me. Something bad is about to happen, I can feel it. /*

Entering an enclosed space, Touya was stunned to see thousands of pieces of plain white paper floating in the air. The mass numbers of paper suddenly turned towards him and flew at him at high speed. Before he even knew what was happening, both his arms and legs had been completely wrapped up by paper. Soon, even his head was entrapped by the white pieces of sheets.

However, before a newly formed spear (made completely out of paper) could pierce through his paper wrapped body, Touya somehow managed to tear his way out by brute force alone. He yelled loudly as he ripped past the paper cocoon and jumped out and away from his enemy – a floating, paper version of a woman wearing an Akatsuki cloak. "You were able to break through my trap, surprising." She commented in a monotone voice.

Touya looked on towards Konan with eyes full of determination. "Where is Ruri-sama? Where are you keeping her?" He asked in a forceful manner.

Konan glanced back impassively. "Why are you still loyal to her?" She asked curiously. "She betrayed you. She sold the Kuunoki for an alliance with us. You should hate her... Abandon her just as she had abandoned you." She taunted in a bland voice but Touya wasn't moved.

"You're wrong. She betrayed us because she loved us. And we will get her back, no matter what the cost." Touya glared. "Now tell us where she is." He demanded.

Instead of answering, Konan rose higher in the air and summoned forth more paper pieces, forming large paper crafted wings behind her back. The large wings spanned at least several metres in length and when it flexes, hundreds of paper Shuriken, shaped as paper planes flew at Touya. The boy was just about to dodge but a large beam of fire burst into existence between him and the paper projectiles, burning the paper Shuriken to ashes.

Konan turned her attention away from the young man only to notice two new intruders – Dokudes Ryoko who was the one breathing fire from her mouth and Kaga standing behind her. Keeping her Jutsu in place and aimed at the flying Akatsuki member, Ryoko used her other hand to pull out a small vile of bluish transparent liquid. Without dropping her fire technique, she threw the vile at Konan, who was doing her best to avoid being burnt by the continuous flames. Once the vile had flown into range, Ryoko activated its hidden seal and the glass burst open in mid air, spilling the small amount of liquid. The moment the liquid hit the air in the atmosphere, it turned into a brownish-green gas that completely covered Konan's paper based body.

Flexing her paper crafted wings, Konan was surprised to find that her body was slowly becoming stiff, as if something in the gas was affecting the paper used to form her body, hardening it and ensuring she's no longer a threat, as well as immobilising her instantly. Without the wings keeping her in the air, Konan fell and hit the ground with quite a hard impact. She glared at the three ex-Kuunoki intruders but kept quiet.

"Once more, tell us where Ruri-sama is." Ryoko threatened, her hands already in preparation for another Jutsu, when a different voice interrupted them.

"She came to us willingly, and we will not let her go." A man with the infamous Rinnegan eyes and long orange hair tied in a high ponytail, squatted on the side walls of the enclosure. He pressed his hands down on the wall and called forth his technique. "Kuchiyose no Jutsu! (Summoning Technique)." In a burst of smoke, a large crab like crustacean summon spit forth a large pool of foam. Ryoko, Kaga and Touya all leapt away to avoid the pool of foam. The foam covered Konan and washed away the hardening effect of the poison gas that had affected her. Eventually Konan re-emerged free of any ill effects, and floated up in the air alongside Pein.

The crab rushed towards the three intruders in an attack formation. Touya stepped in front of his two comrades and smashed his fist right into the crustacean. The impact of the powerful punch of a Taijutsu expert resulted in sudden rush of air caused by the sudden disappearance of the giant summon. Obviously it could not withstand the power of a single punch from Touya.

Undeterred by the disappearance of his summoned animal, Pein simply summoned forth a second creature. This time, it was a large lizard like creature that was the ability to camouflage itself.

"You two, capture the girl. I'll deal with Pein myself." Kaga spoke in a deadly tone. Both Ryoko and Touya glanced at him briefly before nodding in acceptance, not willing to go against the legendary shadow-walker when he's in the mood to fight.

Slapping his hands together in a clap, Kaga began his attack. "Kage Heki no Jutsu! (Shadow Barrier). (2)" Instantly, a large shadowy box like barrier surrounded Pein and his Summon. "Kage no Kekai! (Shadow Prison)" The shadow box darkened until nothing could be seen from the inside. Kaga used Shunshin to reappear in front of his shadow prison and placed both his palms against its walls. Slowly, his body merged inside the black box structure. Quietly, he muttered his next Jutsu. "Kage Sekai no Suru. (Shadow Realm Manipulation)."

Trapped within the shadow world dimension, Pein looked around himself and his summon. All around them was a dark landscape,

filled with mist, weak sunlight filtered in through dead branches of large skeletal trees (3). It reminded Pein of some of the landscape that Itachi was able to dream up using his favourite Jutsu – the Tsukiyomi.

"Welcome to my Kage Sekai (Shadow world). In this world, I control everything." A disembodied voice rang out all throughout the landscape. There was no doubt in Pein's mind that Kaga was not going to go easy on him. "Tell me where Ruri is, and I may let you have a quick death. If not... I can prolong your death for months, perhaps years. After all, in this place, I am god and I can even control time (4)." Kaga's slightly demonic voice continued.

"Do your best, Shadow-user." Pein stated without emotion.

Suddenly, all the shadows around Pein and his summoned creature erupted into life, forming thousands of giant shadow hands and or claws reaching for Pein trying to rip them him from all sides and all angles (5). Pein jumped high into the air to avoid their clutches and watched impassively as his summon was devoured by the shadows surrounding it. Even though his summon had been invisible, the shadows beneath welled up and swallowed the giant creature whole. The lizard's scream of surprise reverberated throughout the pocket dimension as it was eaten alive.

While still in the air, Pein summoned forth several more creatures. A large three headed dog demon and an bird creature of which became his steed as he remained in the air, allowing him to avoid most of the shadows that stayed on the ground below him. He watched in silence as his new canine summon struggled against the moving hands and claws of the shadow enemies. Although each time the summoned creature was hurt, it would divide itself and multiply but the large mass of animated shadows suddenly changed form in retaliation. Instead of just black hands and claws that tried to grapple with its prey and pull them into itself, the shadow mass morphed into large open jaws full of sharp teeth. The canine summons was no match to these mutated shadows; the blackness easily swallowed every last breath from the summons as they bit and

chomped on whole body parts all in an effort to satisfy its hunger for flesh (6).

However, Pein, still safe in the air cared not for the life of his summons; he merely looked around, trying to find a way to escape. Unfortunately for Pein, Kaga was not in the mood to give him time to plan an escape. Soon, dark clouds formed in the 'sky' of the pocket dimension, the mist cleared to show a large forest of dead trees, all covered in eternal living shadow. Thunders roared into existence and Pein knew that his death was coming soon. First a single drop, then a second and a third; in an instant rain poured down from the heavens. But it wasn't normal rain. No, it was acid rain.

Pein watched impassively as his proud Akatsuki cloak rotted and dissolved into nothing under the torrent of acid. The summoned bird he was standing on tried desperately to fly away, to find some place it could land with cover to protect itself from the rain of the sky, whilst still trying to avoid the deadly jaws of the shadows below. The bird creature dropped bombs into the earth below in order to dissipate the shadows that hungered for its flesh. It managed to prolong its life for a time, but could not escape the acid rain pouring onto its burning its flesh until the bones were exposed. Simply put, there was no escape, Pein stayed silent as his summon wavered in the air and eventually plummeted straight down into the waiting jaws of darkness. By then, he had already lost his right arm, which had rotted away into bone, and all his skin was exposed to third degree burns, even his hair and scalp had dissolved away. Kaga had lied. He did not try to kill Pein slowly, but it was certainly a painful way to go.

"Nagato!" Konan yelled out in concern as she watched her comrade be swallowed up the black prison Jutsu. As she turned to assist, her sight was blocked by Touya's youthful figure, with a fist already in preparation to hit her face. Konan didn't even blink. As Touya's powerful punch smashed into her delicate looking face, the head exploded into hundreds of pieces of paper, scattering into the high

winds by the force of Touya's punch. Her body followed and spread apart into a thousand more paper slips. The mass of paper gathered in one spot high in the air, reforming Konan's upper body with giant paper wings behind her. She flapped her wings and shot forth multiple paper Shuriken flying at Touya at high speed.

To defend himself against the oncoming barrage of paper missiles, Touya pulled on the chains surrounding his metallic wrist band and in a surprising move, the chains extended out of the metal revealing the storage seal that was carved into the metal (7). Upon calling forth thick metallic chains of around 3 meters in length, Touya started spinning them rapidly in front of himself, blocking and cutting away the paper Shuriken that had been launched his way.

Whilst Touya was busy dealing with Konan's paper barrage, Ryoko had been performing fire Jutsu after fire Jutsu in the hope of catching Konan in a blast. The winged Akatsuki member was swift in her flight but even she received burns to part of her wings. In retaliation, Konan shot forth more paper Shuriken at her enemies, this time, the paper were made of Kibaku (paper bombs). Upon impacting against Touya's defensive chains, the paper exploded, blasting away Touya and destroying his defence.

"Touya-kun!" Ryoko shouted in concern for the youth, but had to quickly refocus on her enemy in order to dodge a new paper weapon launched by Konan. The spinning paper wheel or ring barely missed slicing Ryoko's legs off. Turning around, Ryoko threw two more veils of poison at Konan before spinning around and cart wheeling away in order to avoid being cut by the returning paper blade. Having learnt from experience, Konan expertly flew away from the veils of poison as it exploded in mid air, creating more of the brownish-green gas of before.

Flapping her wings, Konan was able to disperse the gas away using the movement of air. But as the battle field cleared, she realised that Ryoko had used the gas as a cover in order to grab her youthful team mate and run. Biting her lips in tension, Konan turned around just in time to see Kaga's shadow prison dissolve. Kaga was

nowhere to be seen but all that remained was half the torso of the long haired Pein. The head was missing.

"Damn it! Without the Animal Path, he can't summon the others." Konan cursed as she decided to fly away back to their main headquarters for now. She would need to awaken the others in order to fight the intruders.

"Are you both okay?" Kaga whispered to his two compatriots who leaned heavily against the metallic wall of an underground tunnel.

"We underestimated her. How did you go?" Ryoko answered even as she performed a healing Jutsu to clear away some of Touya's third degree burns.

"I killed that version of Pein and took what's left of his head. It's in storage right now." Kaga answered.

"What should we do now?" Touya asked in a quiet voice.

Kaga's eyes narrowed. "We continue. We still haven't found out where they're keeping Ruri." With those words reminding them of their reason why they came, both Ryoko and Touya gave the shadow walker a determined look and nod.

In a vast chamber where six human size tubes rest, three on each side of the room, Konan stood alone in the middle of the chamber. / *We've lost Chikushodo. Shuurado would cause far too much damage within Ame's borders, so I don't think it would be good to call on him... And Tendo... Should I also awaken Tendo?* / Konan thought to herself for a few moments before finally making up her mind.

"Gakido (Hungry Ghost Path), Ningendo (Human Path), Jigokudo (Hell Path) and... Tendo (Heaven Path or Deva) (8). Awaken." As she spoke these words, four of the tube's hatches opened. From each

tube, a man wearing the same Akatsuki cloak awoke and stepped forth. Each had orange hair and a pair of Rinnegan eyes.

Gakido - a large man with two round spikes sprouting from his cheeks, and a line of smaller spikes down his nose.

Ningendo - a thin but tall man with long orange hair that drift down to the middle of his back.

Jigokudo - another large man with a pair of three spikes scrolling across his face following his age lines. He also had long thin spikes poking out of his ears and a few more beneath his lips.

Tendo - a young man with short spiky hair. He had both his ears pierced by multiple rings of spikes and three thin spikes across his nose.

Tendo, the young man spoke first. "Chikushodo is dead. We will need to hunt down the intruders." After that no one spoke, but all four men disappeared, each heading to a different direction, each seeking their prey. Konan stood silent for a moment, before slowly turning and heading towards the same direction that Tendo had turned to.

As if sensing someone watching them, all three ex-Kuunoki ninja turned their faces up towards the top of one of the many towers within the city of Ame. There, standing tall and arrogant, another Pein stood proud in his stance, this one had long hair – Ningendo.

He jumped, and an instant later, was well within reach of Kaga and his compatriots. Pein's open palm outstretched, reaching to make contact with the intruders. Kaga, Ryoko and Touya all jumped to safety. But as they landed, they all felt the Chakra signatures of more enemies surrounding them. The other Pein's had arrived.

"Katon! Gokakyu no Jutsu!" Ryoko called forth a large ball of flames directed at one of the Peins – the Jigokudo. Unfortunately, just

before the Jutsu impacted against him, another Pein stood in the way – Gakido and somehow managed to absorb the entirety of Ryoko's technique.

"Che! This one absorbs Jutsus!" Ryoko called out a warning.

"Then leave him to me!" Touya pronounced as he ran past Ryoko to take on Gakido. With his chains already released, all he needed to do was flick his wrist one way or the other, and the chains would automatically target his enemies, trying to either pierce or capture.

Having not anticipated the change in strategy, Gakido and Jigokudo suddenly found himself trapped within the chains of Touya, who gripped onto the other end of the chain with a determined look in his eyes. Taking this opportunity in stride, Ryoko jumped high into the air and performed another Katon Gokakyu no Jutsu at the trapped pair, only to be blasted away by Tendo's Shinra Tensei. Touya too would have been pushed off his feet had he not used a large amount of chakra to stick to the ground beneath him and used his other chain to wrap around some of the surrounding buildings to keep him in place.

While Tendo and Ningendo seemed to be occupied and Gakido and Jigokudo were still trapped, Kaga had snuck his way behind the two and was preparing to capture them in his Kage Kekai, as he had done with the previous Pein. However, even though Jigokudo's body was trapped in chains and he was looking away from Kaga, he still managed to summon Gedo – the giant hell monster that could suck souls. Upon seeing the emergence of this creature, Kaga had no choice but to make his retreat.

/ How did he know I was behind him? He was facing away the entire time! / Looking away from his target, Kaga finally released that throughout all this time, Ningendo had been watching him constantly. / So all their Rinnegans are linked? /

Pulling herself out of the rubble of a building that she was smashed into, Ryoko glared at her ripped clothes before performing a quick

hand seal and summoning forth white chakra to surround her open palms. "Touya! Kaga! Cover for me!" She exclaimed as she rushed towards the two trapped Pein with the aim of taking them out first.

"Ryoko no! We must separate them! Their eyes are linked! They see all that each other sees! We must isolate them first!" Kaga's warning came too late. Tendo had already prepared his Jutsu – Bansho Tenin, suddenly jerking Ryoko away from her original prey and pulling her (through mid air) directly towards Tendo himself. In his hands, he had a black rod already in preparation to pierce through Ryoko's chest and she flung through the air towards.

"Ryoko-sama!" Touya shouted in alarm but he too had his own problem. One hand was concentrating on keeping the other two Pein's trapped, and the second arm still had his chains wrapped around a nearby building and wouldn't be removed fast enough for him to avoid the open palms of Ningendo who was only 2 meters away from his location.

Fully prepared to rescue his comrades, Kaga summoned forth his powers and immediately enclosed both Ryoko (still in mid air) and Touya (who was stuck where he stood) in a Kage Kekai. Ningendo's hands bounced across and away from the solid shadow barrier. Tendo's Shinra Tensei technique also had no affect once Ryoko's body was fully enclosed in Kaga's pocket dimension. Quickly, Kaga dematerialise his Kage Kekai, taking his comrades away from the battlefield. He himself quickly jumped into a nearby shadow as the two trapped Pein – Gakido and Jigokudo were freed once no one was in control of the chains trapping them.

The four Peins gazed around their surroundings. The three intruders had once again escaped. All four Peins picked a director and spread out, searching once more for their prey, and this time, not allowing them to get away so easily.

Within the shadow realm, in the darkened corridor of before, both Ryoko and Touya looked angry at their failed attempt in combat

against Pein.

"Let's review what we know of each of their ability." Kaga tried to lift their spirit by refocusing their thoughts on information gathering.

"One of them can absorb Chakra based Jutsus." Ryoko stated firmly, thinking about the how Gakido had absorbed her Katon technique.

"One of them has to make physical contact in order to affect his opponent. Although I don't know exactly what his power does." Touya remarked about how Ningendo was always trying to make contact with his enemies bodies.

"One of them summons some sort of creature from hell." Kaga stated, remembering the monstrous thing that had the words 'Hell' upon its forehead. "I really don't want to know what that thing can do, but I know it won't be good news."

"And lastly, the forth can use some sort of magnetic repulsion and attraction." Ryoko finalised, winching at the memory of being the victim of said technique. The scratches around her body were a good reminder.

"We also know that their eyes are linked. Even if we attack one from their blind spot, as long as one of the others can see us, they all know where we are and what we're doing. The best way forward is to attack them one at a time. They also work incredibly well together, covering for each other's weaknesses and blank spots." Kaga concluded his observations.

After a few moments in silence, Touya finally voiced what was on everyone's minds. "I don't think we will succeed any further in our information gathering. If we try to infiltrate any more, we run the risk of being captured and then we lose everything. As we've just seen, we can't win against Pein... At least, not with just the three of us."

In the gloomy silence that followed, it was with quiet understanding that all three agreed to withdraw for now. They had already gathered

quite a lot of information about their enemies powers, and they had a captured enemy in their minds with which Konoha could gain more valuable information. Even though they did not achieve their primary goal of finding out where Ruri was being held, their mission couldn't be considered a complete failure either. However, it was still a bitter pill to taste knowing that a member of their precious family was still being held in the bowels of Akatsuki.

Many hours later, when Pein and Konan were sure that all three of the intruders had not made their presences felt, the two Akatsuki members finally released a sigh of relief. Although neither had mentioned it out loud, fighting against Kaga and the other two ex-Kuunoki nins had been tougher than expected, especially Kaga.

Glaring across the horizon from his high open balcony, Tendo Pein spoke in a grim voice. "We must find strategies to go against Kaga's shadow manipulation skills. His Kage Kekai will be a problem for us in the future."

Konan nodded with his assessment. "Perhaps we should leave him to Madara. After all, they both specialise in Space-time Ninjutsu."

Tendo Pein continued to glare at nothing in particular, before he finally spoke after some long minutes of silence. "I'm beginning to think we will not be able to trust Madara to keep his end of the bargain."

Konan looked at her partner in surprise. Never had she heard him waver in his determination before. Thinking over it herself, she slowly realised what he meant. "This is about Ruri isn't it? Her disappearance is quite suspicious. Especially since Zetsu was technically the last to see her alive considering he has eyes everywhere. Deidara had nothing to report upon his return." Frowning a little, she asked curiously. "You don't believe that she has betrayed us and left to join our enemies?"

Shaking his head slightly, Tendo declared in a firm voice. "No, when she agreed to join Akatsuki, it was with her full will and agreement to fulfil her part in our plan. The fact that she disappeared after collecting the Rokubi could only mean that she was ambushed by someone. And you and I both know that there are very few people who could capture and hold the Lady Oracle."

"No... I'm sure this is Madara's doing." Tendo Pein stated grimly. Behind him, Konan gazed with concerned eyes, unsure of what the future will bring.

In an underground facility, three Waterfall Shinobis ran for their lives. "Hurry. He's catching up to us!" One of the men called out in alarm, but his warning was too late. Three giant pythons raced towards them, wrapping their elongated body around their prey, they crushed the ribs of the Shinobis even as they bit into their necks, breaking their victim's throats.

Slowly trotting behind them, Kabuto revealed himself behind his dark cloak. "Looks like I'm finally getting use to these powers. Not bad. Not bad at all. Perhaps it's time I got things moving from my end as well."

/ Let's see. I could join forces with Danzo or with Uchiha Madara. It all depends on which side would allow me my revenge on Konoha and especially on Uzumaki Ruri. / Kabuto thought to himself, his mind now obsessed with only hate and payback.

Having lost the battle with his sister and the team of Konoha Ninjas just a few weeks ago, Kabuto had spent most of his time learning about his new abilities. He swore that he would not make the same mistake again of underestimating his sister. Truly, their last battle had impressed him. He did not know that she had mastered the Sonic Sound Blast technique. Something that even Orochimaru had not mastered. Although that was mostly because the late Sannin did not spend all his time creating new techniques, only stealing them from existing people. The Sonic Sound Blast had been an original

technique developed by Orochimaru, but he had never finished it, only the theory of it. Now knowing that his sister had somehow managed to not only complete the technique but master it, it must have been Kageru's doing. The more he thought about it, the more Kabuto hated Kageru.

She had been a thorn in his side for quite a few years now, ever since she returned from the Kuunoki Chuunin Exams. The impassive mask that she always wore and indifference that she felt for the world, fell away. Suddenly she had a direction, a goal in mind; and she became an unstoppable force. She was sent on many, many more missions and succeeded without flaw. She led inadequate teams to victory, even with his interference, she still managed to beat the odds every chance she got. She built a reputation for herself as not only one of Orochimaru's strongest and most reliable generals, but as an honourable fighter and one who treats people fairly with an uncompromising sense of honour.

With her fame and notoriety rising, people started respecting her. Not just the Shinobis (rag tag group that they all started out as), but also the civilians all over Rice Country began praising her as a fellow countryman they were proud of. Any more and she would have become a national hero of sorts.

He had warned Orochimaru that his power base built on fear and terror was slowly diminishing. But the old Sannin didn't care. As long as Kageru worked under him, all was well for the Snake summoner. Kabuto on the other hand, had been insanely jealous.

It wasn't a surprise to Kabuto that Kageru had strung their disorganised army back together within just a few short weeks. Loyalty was hard to come by in Otagakure, and with Orochimaru gone, there was no true leader in place. Sure, some of Orochimaru's followers may have followed him, but Kabuto was no fool. He knew how much they feared him, and given a chance, they would have abandoned him in combat if the stakes were against them. No, it was better to leave Kageru the mess that was once Otagakure to fix,

while he went on his own merry way to build his own unstoppable, unendingly loyal army of un-dead troops.

/ Hmmm... Danzo is obsessively loyal to Konoha. I think joining up with Madara would be the best course of action... / Smiling grimly to himself, Kabuto set off on a course to where he knew one of Uchiha Madara's bases to be.

"Team 8, Inuzuka Kiba, Hyuuga Hinata and Aburame Shino. Returning from duty!" Said team announced proudly in front of Jiraiya, as he sat in the hated Hokage chair.

"Report." Jiraiya stated gloomily, even as he eyes the piles of paperwork sitting on his desk. */ This is why I don't WANT to be Hokage...!* / He complained silently in his mind. Tsunade would be back in a day or two, but when she does return she had already stated in her previous message that she expect all the paperwork to be completed and filed away prior to her return. Of course, had he spent the entire time that she was away working on the paperwork, it wouldn't have been such a problem now. But, Jiraiya being Jiraiya, just had to spend some time at the local hot springs. After all, his infamous Icha Icha books won't just write themselves.

However, he had been spending some time sending toads to try to infiltrate Root forces with little success. They were always discovered and killed, or somehow transported to somewhere else without their knowledge, or had been placed under a Genjutsu that Jiraiya couldn't crack. Even sending in his own Clones had not done much good. Sighing, Jiraiya knew that Danzo was a true paranoid with the insane amount of security he placed around his hidden army. It was scary how much power base Danzo already has.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Jiraiya returned to listen back onto Kiba's report. "So let me get this straight. Kageru got a copy of the sealing technique for the San Hoshi Fuuin Jutsu from Naruto a few years ago. It's original purpose is to save one life and ensure that the recovery restores them to be best of health they had ever

been, whilst draining the life-force of the one performing the Jutsu. However, Yuse Samure, a former Shinobi of the Hidden Snow and now wondering mercenary managed to alter the seal, so that it uses charka from multiple people in order to heal the patient. Am I correct?"

The members of Team 8 nodded in agreement. "Samure-san and his team will be making their way to Konoha in a few weeks time, once they've ensure that all those experimented by Orochimaru are back to full health. Shizune-san will be escorting them with help from the ex-Kuunoki Ninjas that stayed behind to help them complete the process. Kageru-san, Suzumi-san, Suigetsu-san and Kimimaro-san are working hard to regather the scattered troops of Otogakure and turning them into a proper army to assist us. But for now, Kageru-san has given us this scroll. She says it contains all the information that you require." Giving the Sannin the scroll, Team 8 waited patiently for any further orders.

"Good work. It'll be good to have that seal established here in Konoha. Something like that would be extremely helpful in wartime. Thanks you three, you've done an exceptional job, go rest up. You've got the next 3 days off." Welcoming the break, all three members of Team 8 bowed and left the Hokage chamber.

Once the three teens were gone, Jiraiya immediately opened the scroll Kageru had given him. But before he could summon the contents out of the obviously sealing scroll, the door to the Hokage office was opened by Jubei. Behind him stood Kaga, Dokudes Ryoko and Kataichi Touya, obviously having returned from their spying mission in Ame.

The five members settled around the Hokage's table and spent the next hour or two reviewing all the information they had gathered. In the end, Jiraiya gave a healthy sigh. "Rinnegan huh... I think I might know who the Pein really is. I once had three pupils in Ame. Konan would be the lady using Paper related Jutsu, it has always been her forte. Nagato would be the one with the Rinnegan, but he had bright red hair, and none of the descriptions you've given me match his

looks. However, one of them that you described sound like Yahiko, but the Yahiko I knew did not have the Rinnegan."

"All five members called themselves Pein, they did not move like individuals, but more like a unit. I personally think they are not five separate people, but more like one person controlling five bodies." Ryoko gave her input, being the expert in medical sense; she had nodded the very strange interactions between the different Peins. Namely, there was no interaction between the different Peins. They did not have to speak to one another or even look at one another to pass messages or form plans. It was very disconcerting to fight them.

"I believe Ryoko's assessment is accurate. They all share the same vision, they must share one mind. Perhaps it's something like Kuunoki's soul mind." Kaga added as he revisited the entire fight scene in his head. "From what I remember of Ruri telling me some time ago. The Rinnegan was the Doujutsu of the Rikudo Sennin. But the Rikudo Sennin had been, at one point, the Uzumaki leader from thousands of years ago. The circles around his pupils are similar to the Yochigan but obviously, they have different affects."

"Really?" Jiraiya asked in surprise. "I did not know that Rikudo Sennin was once the Uzumaki Leader? Does that mean that the Uzumakis should have been able to develop the Rinnegan if they so wish?" Pausing in serious thought, Jiraiya suddenly remembered something about the typical Uzumaki. "Actually... Nagato may have been born an Uzumaki in the first place. He had really red hair. And from memory, most of the Uzumakis born into the Breed house had red hair. I wonder why the Prophet house often have looks that differ from their Breed house counterparts."

The four ex-Kuunoki Shinobis shifted in tension before Touya finally decided to answer. "When an unborn child is selected to become the next member of the Prophet house, even before they were born, a seal had already been placed on them to link them to the soul mind. Much of those babies genetics were altered by the genome within the soul mind, to make them more susceptible to acquire powers to

see into the future or the past. Unfortunately, because the seal is placed on the womb of the mother, it also affects the next child that is born from the same women. That's why the direct line which produces the Prophet house and the members of the Breed house that would lead to the next generation of Prophet house members often have different coloured hair, eyes and even skin tones. Ruri-sama and Yuuki-sama were born blonde following their father. Rika-sama and Tenka-sama were born with black hair that quickly turned white in times of stress. I heard that Kentaku-sama and Mokutaku-sama actually had brown hair similar to that of Hashirama Senju. But most of the other Breed house members, like Kushina-san had the dominant red hair. I admit, Naruto-sama is a bit of a conundrum because he was not born with the seal that linked him to the soul mind. It was only added much later in his life."

Pondering the complexities of the Uzumaki clan once more, Jiraiya truly wondered how such a clan could hold on to their ancient history and resist the changes that time itself forced on the rest of the world. He pitied Ruri. To be born into a role that was written in stone even before your birth, to be told what to become and what responsibilities it entails and place all that on the shoulders of a child barely old enough to understand puberty. It was cruel, and he understood why she was desperate to break out, to become what she wanted to be, to make choices that she wants to make, to be wrong and be punished for her own free will. In a way, he was glad the Kuunoki no longer exist. Such a life would make Naruto miserable. His godson was a free spirit, always wanting to change the world for the better with an unending will power and unstoppable determination. He had faith in his godson, he had faith in Naruto. Because he is Naruto.

Naruto glared apprehensively at the dish that sits before him, mind dreaming up excuses on how he could get out of eating the old sage toad - Shiima's so called special dish. Giving her a strained smile, Naruto tried to reason with his host. "It's really okay, Shiima-sama. I've brought with me many ration bars that gives me all the energy I need in order to undertake Senjutsu Training. I really don't want to

be a bother to you. Its bad enough I live under your house, I will feel very uncomfortable if I eat your food as well. Please accept my sincere thanks for the thought though." It took a while longer but Naruto somehow managed to sweet talk his way out of eating the 'dish', whatever it was. Suffice to say, he felt as if he'd just avoided a near death experience.

"Ahh man! That's such a waste, I love Shiima-san's cooking!" Gamakichi complained, hobbling beside Naruto as the two made their way towards where the training grounds Fukusaku-sama had chosen.

"If you liked it so much, you should have eaten it on my behalf." Naruto snapped at his companion, in no mood to relive the memory of almost being forced to digest bugs and worms as part of his meal.

The two bantered between one another for a while before silence fell as they met up with Fukusaku - the older toad sage charged with training Naruto in the Sage arts. "Come on, Naruto-chan. Get your butt up to position and let's see if you can finally reach sage mode on your own this time."

It took a little while for Naruto climb his way up to the top of the mountain peak, where he gingerly sat atop a small slab of tile. Keeping his balance immaculately as he had learnt back in the Kuunoki, Naruto closed his eyes and concentrated on assimilating the Natural charka around him. A few minutes later, he could feel the change in him. He opened his eyes and saw a new world, brighter, clearer and father than he ever imagined. What he could not see on his own face was that his eyes had changed, he had finally reached the epitome of sage mode. Fukusaku smiled indulgently at his latest pupil. Naruto had talent, patience (which really surprised the toad) and an unstoppable will to reach his goals. When he sets his mind to something, he strives his best and puts in a hundred and ten percent of personal effort to reach it.

"Good. Good! Naruto-chan. You've finally accomplished Sage mode. Now comes the next step. It's time I teach you a new fighting style

that uses Senjutsu Chakra effectively in combat. It's called the Kawazu Kumite! (Frog-Fu)"

"I felt that I should come greet you, Tobi. Sorry, I think you go by Uchiha Madara as well? I can never tell which to call you by." Kabuto stated calmly as he stood on what seems to be skeleton of a giant dinosaur that once traversed the land.

"I'm impressed you even found me." Tobi, or Uchiha Madara commented back.

"Remember, I've served as a spy in numerous countries and spent some time working for Akatsuki myself. Don't underestimate what I might know." Kabuto answered as he jumped down to the ground level, facing Tobi on the same level.

"Yes, you were one of Sasori's spies... and a traitor to Akatsuki." When Tobi prepared to launch an attack at Kabuto, Kabuto slammed his hands on the ground and summoned forth a few coffin like boxes. The doors for these coffins fell and in each, they revealed the bodies of the three ex-Akatsuki members – Hidan, Sasori and Kakuzu.

Shocked, Tobi could only mutter under his breath. "Edo Tensei (Impure World Resurrection)."

"A technique only the second Hokage and Orochimaru-sama knew how to use. Now with me, that makes three people. Not only that, I have also surpassed its previous users." Kabuto boasted confidently. Gazing at Tobi's silent mask, Kabuto announced calmly. "Don't worry, I'm not here to fight. In fact, I came here to join forces with you."

"You want to join forces?" Tobi narrowed his single eye in suspicion. "What's in it for me?"

"You're planning to start your war very soon. I can bolster your fighting power." Kabuto answered nonchalantly. Nodding his head at the three dead Akatsuki members, he continued. "Not only can I

resurrect the former Akatsuki members, but I'm working my way through the Kiri's Seven Swordsman, the Kages of various countries and few notable fighters of the past as well. Quite a line up of powerful men. Don't you think?" Kabuto smirked nastily at Tobi.

"And what do you want in return?" Tobi finally remarked.

"Uzumaki Ruri, and the destruction of Konoha." Kabuto smiled as if he was a cat that had just caught the canary in its trap. "The same things you do."

"What're you trying to accomplish?" Tobi asked in a deadly tone.

"Nothing in particular. My interest lie solely with learning the pure, unaltered truth about Ninjutsu. To do this, I will need the eyes of an Uchiha. But more than that, I want the knowledge that is hidden behind Uzumaki Ruri." Kabuto answered with a shrug.

Thinking about the usefulness of Ruri for his own plans, Tobi decided to test Kabuto. "And what if I say no?"

Kabuto slammed his hands on the ground and called forth a different coffin with his Edo Tensei. Inside rest the body of one of the most infamous Ninjas in the world – the body of Uchiha Madara.

Tobi was shocked to speechlessness for the first time in a long time. "Impossible." Was all he could say.

"Did you really think I'd extend my hand to you without a backup plan? You **cannot** refuse me." Kabuto stated firmly in a threatening voice.

"You madman. How did you do this?" Tobi couldn't help but utter.

"Oh you know. Anyway, you can relax. I haven't told a soul." Kabuto smirked. "But then again, I think Uzumaki Ruri already knows. Don't you?"

A long silence ensued. Finally Tobi made a decision. "Yakushi Kabuto. I honestly never imagined you had such potential. Any conflict with you would only serve to weaken my war-fighting capabilities. And to set this up just to prepare for meeting me. You are a shred man." He praised, impressed with how far the snake sannin's apprentice had come along. "I accept your offer on one condition. We wait until after the war is over before I hand over Ruri. Until then, I won't let you near her. If need be, I will be watching her day and night. You will have to get your own Uchiha."

"I understand, her knowledge is useful after all. Both to you and to me. I knew you were reasonable." Kabuto smirked in triumph. "Uchiha Madara, you truly are in your own league." He taunted the fake.

"Wise guy. I'll reformulate my plan to account for your battle power. Come" Tobi ordered as Kabuto de-summon his corpse warriors once more and prepared to follow Tobi.

"I'm surprised you didn't summon Itachi." Tobi asked curiously.

"I tried, but he didn't come. You do know what that means right? Uchiha Itachi is still alive."

Slamming the doors open violently, Tobi stormed his way inside the hidden chamber. Having left Kabuto to go and collect a few more samples of tissue from deceased warriors in order to summon forth a larger number of undead soldiers, Tobi wasted no time in order to approach the one being that may hold the answers to all his question. There was absolutely no way he would trust Kabuto. As such, there was only one other avenue of information for him to pursue, luckily, he had this one in the bag.

"Tell you all you know about the Edo Tensei! How it activates and how can it be stopped!" He demanded, glaring at the prone form of Ruri, still tightly bound in her wooden chains.

Ruri, having spent quite a few days locked in this hidden chamber had received no water and no food. She felt weak, even blinking her crust infested eyes took too much energy. But she persevered. After a long moment of silence, she managed to utter one word: "water..."

Tobi's single eye twitched in irritation. "Zetsu, allow her some drink of water, make sure she doesn't die in captivity." He ordered and Zetsu slowly emerged from the ground underneath his feet. Shuffling towards the lady Oracle, Zetsu allowed her to drink from a small water bottle he had on hand. It took a while for her to swallow the precious water down, leaving most of it to drip down her lips, throat and stain her dirty clothes. Eventually, she had her fill and Zetsu walked away and remerged back into the ground.

"Now talk." There was no sign of patience in Tobi's demeanour today.

Ruri gave him a wary smile. "Looks like you just met Yakushi Kabuto, am I right?" She whispered.

"You let him live!" Tobi accused. "You should have killed him when you took out Orochimaru."

"But that wasn't the order I was given. I was only told to take out Orochimaru and retrieve his ring." Ruri argued in a quiet voice. "No one mentioned to take out all his underlings."

Her comments only infuriate Tobi more. "Tell me what I want to know about the Edo Tenshi!" He demanded once more, ignoring her previous comments.

Closing her eyes in concentration, Ruri began her explanation. "The Edo Tensei (Impure World Resurrection) is a variant of the Summoning Technique. It calls the soul of a departed human back from the afterlife. The 'Pure World', back to this plane, the 'Impure World'. And to do that, the summoner needs a specific amount of the physical body of the person he wishes to revive." Pausing, Ruri licked her lips to wet them a bit more. "In other words, one needs enough of the 'blue prints', also known as DNA. If the soul has been

sealed elsewhere, or if there isn't enough DNA, they cannot be resurrected. In addition, the targets soul must reside in the 'Pure World.' Souls like the Yondaime Hokage, in fact, all the previous Hokages, who has had their souls devoured and placed inside the belly of the Shinigami with the Dead Demon seal, cannot be resurrected. Similarly, if there was no DNA to be collected, that person also cannot be resurrected. For example, every member of the Uzumaki clan who had their souls and body dissolve into liquid and form part of the soul mind. Their DNA can never be collected."

"For the Edo Tensei, the user would spend most of their time trying to gather enough DNA, as this can be quite an ordeal. Simply put, it is grave robbing. Once you've gathered enough DNA, then you start drawing the seal. In the centre of the seal, you place a living sacrifice. Upon activation, the sacrifices body is covered in a new form of 'skin' from the underworld. Finally, the living human becomes a vessel for the soul of the dead one, completing the Edo Tensei. Lastly, to lock away the vessel's personality and make them obedient pawns for the user, a talisman is implanted into their heads. The revived person will then follow the orders of the user. They are unable to be 'killed' and they also have access to all their original techniques, regardless of whether it is a bloodline or not." Ruri finished, closing her eyes in rest.

"What are its weaknesses?" Tobi questioned, intrigued and a little fearful of this technique.

"It's one of the most powerful techniques in this world, created by the Second Hokage, perfected by Orochimaru, but I believe Kabuto can take it even further. There are no known weaknesses in the technique that would pose a risk to the user." She concluded.

"That's a LIE! There must be a weakness. All techniques have flaws. Don't you dare hold out the truth from me!" Tobi yelled at his prisoner in frustration, violently slapping her awake and leaving a deep red mark on her face. "Tell me the truth. How do I stop this technique."

"I said there was no known risk to the user, that doesn't mean the technique is unstoppable." Ruri snapped back irritated, her face bruised and she could feel a trickle of blood dripping down from her cut lip. "You could take control of the user and force them to release the Jutsu. You could seal away the body of the undead, or you could work on destroying the talisman, ruining Kabuto's control over his puppet. Or if you're good enough in Fuiinjutsu, you could place a seal on top of his seal to negate the summoning in the first place, sending the soul back to the 'pure world'. There are always options; they're just not easy options."

After a few long minutes of silence, where by Tobi used the time to reassemble his thoughts. Coming to a conclusion in his own mind, the man known as Uchiha Madara stormed back out of the room, not even bothering to glance back at Ruri.

Once the doors were closed leaving her alone in the chamber, Ruri gave a sardonic smile. "There's a reason why the Nidaime Hokage abandoned the use of the Edo Tensei. But I'll let you all find out about the curse yourself."

Yah, another chapter done.

(1) The same people that Jiraiya interrogated. I never knew their name. So I keep on call them man number 1 and man number 2.

(2) To learn more about Kaga's techniques, please go to my website, links are on my profile's page.

(3) Imagine something like a horror game landscape – especially silent hill.

(4) This is a lie. Kaga can't maintain the Kage Sekai for more than 5 days in reality, but he can make it feel as if you've been in there for an eternity. A bit like Itachi's Tsukiyomi, 24 hours experience in a split second.

(5) Inspired by Full Metal Alchemist, when the door of truth opens, all those black hands of shadow grabbing on to Al and Ed, trying to rip them apart.

(6) Think of Pride's shadowy form in Full Metal Alchemist . I didn't include any eyes in Kage's shadow monster, but the mouths are freaky.

(7) Similar to how in the Canon, Sasuke had paper seals wrapped around his wrist in which he can call forth hundreds of Shurikens to be launched at Itachi. This time, instead of throwing weapons, I have chains sealed inside the storage seal that is 'carved' into the metallic band strapped around Touya's wrist and legs. Mind you, these are Chakra sensitive chains, so you can conduct Chakra through them.

(8) I'm just going to stick with the Japanese translations (Gakido, Tendo, Ningendo and Jigokudo). If I do deviate, it would just to call one of them 'Deva'. I find it very difficult myself to remember who is who and if I have to say "Animal Path" or "Hungry Ghost Path" too often, I'd probably start climbing up a wall in frustration.

I am alive...

Don't know when the next chapter is gonna be out though. Please review and give me your comments.

Scenes VII NEW in 2017!

Trials of Faith

Karrafear

Summary: SEQUAL to Faith in Humanity and Restoration of Faith; PG-13. 2 and half years have passed and now is the beginning of the trials of Faith. Chapter 11: Scenes VII

Disclaimer: Naruto is an anime and manga series created by Masashi Kishimoto. It does not belong to me; I'm simply using the characters and plot for my own creative devices.

"Demon's talk", /Thoughts/, "Speech", 'Speech emphasis', ((FLASHBACK)), Titles , (Author's interruptions)

Yes, I am still alive. I can't believe I'm getting back onto this after 5 freaking years.

I had lost my passion for Naruto when the whole Naruto/Sasuke – Hashirama/Madara - Asura/Indra plot happened. I hated it with a passion to the point I actually stopped following the Naruto manga for a time. Somehow, someway, it was due to your incredible reviews and support that I'm getting back into this again.

Be warned though, I will deviate from the Canon series quite a bit from this point on. There will be war much sooner, there will be death. I will try to make it quick, and there will hopefully be NO SUPER STRONG GODDESS KAGUYA!

Chapter 11

"Welcome to Konoha. I hope you have been successful in your endeavors to help your people." Tsunade raised her hand in gesture to invite her guests to sit down on the chairs available.

Samure (the resident seal master), his friend Daiku and Shizune all sat comfortably on the chairs facing Tsunade.

Raising her eyebrows slightly in confusion, Tsunade continued. "I thought for sure that Kageru would accompany you back. No offence, but this was her project, and this alliance is with the Sound village, not a ragtag group of nomadic shinobis. Mind telling me what's going on?"

Samure shrugged. "Kageru is busy organising the Sound Village's military. News have travelled to us that all the five great nations are joining hands to fight Akatsuki. As an ally of Konoha, she needs to step up as well. Sound doesn't have the resources that Konoha does, but at the very least, she can offer up a number of shinobis to help with the cause, and organising them into mid-range, long-range and short-range fighters, or into categories of Ninjutsu, Genjutsu or Taijutsu specialities. I'm not sure if she herself will be participating, or not though. Hence she sent the rest of us ahead to start setting up the healing seals here, and where-ever you need it to be."

"Hmm.. Not a bad idea. I'm not surprised that her forces are not ready yet. It's not easy when you've just lost a village leader and half your troops walk off the job." Tsunade nodded understandingly.

Shizune then stood up and pulled a scroll out of her sleeve. "Tsunade-sama. This is all that I was able to find regarding Orochimaru's plans with Konoha, I think you will find them most interesting (1)." She handed the scroll to the Hokage.

Tsunade wasted no time unrolling the scroll. Soon, both her eyebrows rose in surprise. "I can't believe this. Orochimaru was helping him for years. All those experiments were condoned?! All of those deaths, even the eyes! And what's this about cells from my grandfather!? ... This is the proof that I've been waiting for." She muttered breathlessly, before her eyes darkened in anger. "That traitor..."

Narrowing her eyes in concentration, she refocussed on her guests. "I'm sorry to cut this meeting short, but it looks like I have something urgent I need to focus on. Shizune will show you to the Konoha hospital, please choose one of the free operating rooms to set up the seal. I'll be sending the two Konoha shinobis affected by the curse seal to you once you are ready. In the meantime, please enjoy your stay at Konoha."

Firmly dismissed, it didn't take long for the guests to leave her office. The moment they were out and far enough away not to hear here, Tsunade yelled. "ANBU!"

Instantly, four figures emerged surrounding their Hokage.

"Get me a direct call with the Daimyou of the Fire Country; I also want a reverse summoning set up for me to forward him something highly classified. It is important that it gets to his eyes and his eyes only this instant! Get me Jiraiya, Nara Shikaku and Dokudes Juubei NOW!" As commanded by the military chief, all for Anbu guards scattered to do their duties.

Not a minute later found Jiraiya, Nara Shikaku and Juubei strolling into the Hokage's office.

"Good, you're all here. I've got wonderful news." She grinned sadistically at them, which gave all three men the creeps.

"Uh... did you win the lottery again?" Jiraiya tentatively asked, afraid that the end of the world was upon them.

"No, you IDIOT!" Tsunade threw a book at her old teammate, who ducked in fear. "Shizune is back from the Sound and with the others who can recreate that seal to get rid of Orochimaru's curse seal. Not only that, she found some incriminating evidence of Danzo definitely having contact with Orochimaru, for a long time. The Uchiha massacres lead to secret implantations of Sharingan eyes onto Danzo's arms, and there was even a mention of stealing and implanting my Grandfather – Senju Hashirama's genes into Danzo

as well. Turns out Orochimaru's first invasion into Konoha was facilitated by Danzo, the invasion that lead to Sarutobi's death! This is proof of treason against Konoha right here. Not only that, Orochimaru somehow had incriminating evidence that Danzo had dealings with Hanzo the Salamander near the end of the third Shinobi war, against Konoha policy and the Fire Country's national interest at the time. That's proof of treason against the Fire Country, not just Konoha. This is what I've been waiting for. I've got a conference call set up in five minutes with the Fire Daimyo. Jiraiya, I want you with me at the call. Nara, I want you to organise the ANBU to ready themselves for a raid against the Root. Juubei, can you spare me some people to join in on the fight. This must all go right or we're gonna land ourselves in a civil war. We have one chance to clean out all of Danzo's influence and the root of his disease, and we better make it count."

Within minutes following Tsunade's announcement, everything was prepared and ready to go. All they need now is the final approval from the Fire Daimyo.

Tsunade stood firmly facing her superior counterpart on the giant computer screen, who looked vaguely pale as he continued to read through the scroll that Tsunade had reverse summoned to him for his confidential perusal. Finally, he opened his mouth to ask tentative: "How accurate is this information? How sure are we that all that is written here is truth?"

"110% My Lord, I would stake my life on it." Tsunade answered without wavering. "For too long, Danzo had acted in his own self-interest, and he has too much influence with the other Konoha Councillors. He has remained untouchable politically for too long. But this... This is treason. Against Konoha. Against the Fire Country." Taking a deep breath, she asked once more. "My Lord, we must act, and act now."

The Fire Daimyo slumped his shoulders at the certainty in her voice, disheartened at the news. "Alright." Closing his eyes, he firmed his resolve. Reopening his eyes with a determined gaze, he gave his

command. "I give you my approval to eradicate all of Himura Danzo's influence within Konoha and within the Fire Country. Politically and financially, he is stripped of all his power and resources. His assets are to be frozen, and all of his former power of governing authority is withdrawn. Please place both Utatane Koharu and Mitokado Homura under house-arrest effectively immediately. Until a full investigation is finalised as to what their involvement are (if any) in the incidences written on this scroll, I cannot trust them to act on good faith for the interest of Konoha. I will send a scroll with these instructions with my stamp of authority by the hour. Tsunade, I want you to weed out everything that man has touched and destroy it all. Give me a final report when you are done, understand?" His voice was strong, his gaze unwavering. This was the most powerful man in Fire Country (2).

"Understood, Sir!" Tsunade saluted the Daimyo and nodded to the side to cut the conference call.

Less than an hour following the Daimyo's directive, forty Anbu, Jounin and Tokubetsu Jounin shinobis were standing before Tsunade in preparation for the raid. She had already sent Asuma and Ibiki to place the former Councillors under house arrest as per the Daimyo's orders.

Kakashi had 'procured' Sai (against his will) and provided him to Yamanaka Inochi in order to do a memory scan to find out where the Danzo's hidden Root bases are hidden inside Konoha. The mind invasion broke Sai's mind, but Inochi was confident that with the help of the Dokudes family, he could mend Sai's mental health back. In the meantime, the information he gathered about Root was absolutely critical for Tsunade's forces in order to raid the hideout hidden deep in the Hokage monument and surrounding forests.

"Listen up men! We are about to embark on an SS-Class mission to rid Konoha of an internal threat. A threat so dangerous, it has the potential to throw Konoha into a civil war within itself. We are to find and eliminate this threat and all its related influences. This is a directive straight from the top, the Fire Daimyo himself. As stated

before, this is a SS-Class mission. All records of this mission will be erased effectively immediately, this mission did not exist, it never happened. If you die on this mission, you will be listed down as MIA (Missing in Action) for the allocated time period before being registered as presumed deceased. Your families will never know you died on this mission." Gazing deep into the eyes of every soldier standing before her, she continued with her final orders. "Complete the mission and don't die. Move out!"

Jiraiya in the lead used Anbu hand signs to signal to the rest of his entourage. /Main Target at base of Hokage Mountain. Beware of Bloodline users. Root numbers unknown. Possible B to A rank Ninja. Use Caution. Follow my lead./ It didn't take them long to reach their destination.

"Lord Danzo!" A white cloaked Anbu with a standard mask barged into Danzo's office, interrupting his quiet tranquillity as he was reading a report.

"What is it, Fuu?" Danzo growled lowly, hating to be interrupted when he actually had some quiet time to himself. "Didn't I send you out to chase down Kabuto who was sighted near the Konoha's borders recently?"

The Anbu bowed low on his knee in apology. "You did, Lord Danzo. But I have urgent news! 35 minutes ago, I felt an agent's mind break due to the mental invasion of a Yamanaka mind walker. It was Agent Sai, who was assigned to Team Kakashi. I immediately doubled back to inform you of this incident. I do not know what the Yamanaka mind invasion has found out about our cause, but I am sure that Agent Sai's mind is broken and all the secrets he held will be available to the invader."

A split second of silence later, Danzo stood from his chair. "Dajim, Tera, Torune, Terai (3)! Gather the troops and call for all hands on battle stations. We are about to be invaded!"

Just as he said his words, the security alarm started ringing all around the compound, signalling that the invasion has already begun. Danzo glared with his full fury. "Soldiers! Hold your ground and kill the invaders."

Danzo ran out of his office entrance. Before long, he was surrounded at all sides by his own troops, it didn't take long after that for him and his men to encounter the resistance group. Eyes widening in surprise at who was leading the invaders, Danzo growled. "What is the meaning of this? JIRAIYA!"

Having pierced several Root Anbu members with laser sharp needles from his hair, Jiraiya faced Danzo unflinchingly. "By order of the Fire Daimyo, you are sentenced to death, Danzo." He simply replied. "You have nowhere to run to now. All your bases in the Fire Country are being raided right at this very moment!"

Upon hearing his response, three of Danzo's Anbu guards immediately stood in front of their leader and took the blunt of the weapons, be it Kunai, shuriken, swords and even explosive tags thrown at them. The resulting explosions was so large that it took down quite a few Root Anbu forces and partially caved in the hidden entry way that everyone was fighting within.

Unfortunately, the explosion also gave Danzo and two of his guards the opportunity to escape during the chaos. Knowing the hidden passages like the back of his hands, Danzo lead his two guards through another secret entrance and made their way out; only to be confronted by members of the Inuzuka family and their pack of dogs waiting for them.

Danzo released a torrent of wind at his opponents, forcing them to duck away from his technique and allowing his small group to escape once more. Fuu, one of the surviving guards threw down a smoke and sting bomb, effectively hiding their sent from the tracking animals. Torune who is running ahead of Danzo and Fuu, suddenly signaled for his leader to stop as there was an unexpected opponent before them.

Surprisingly, the one standing in the way of their escape path was not a member of the Konoha hunting party.

"What are you doing here, Yakushi Kabuto?" Danzo demanded, feeling slight tension as he could feel his pursuers following him not far behind. In just one night, he has practically lost everything he had spent his entire life building. He did not know what the hell kind of information Tsunade presented to the Fire Daimyo, but for the Daimyo to call for his head in an instant, even after his long years of service for Konoha and the Fire Country, it must have been some highly incriminating information about his past conduct.

Opposite him, Kabuto who undid the hood of his dark cloak, smiled and shrugged with confidence. "I heard from a reliable source that you have Uchiha Shisui's eye transplanted into yourself. Shisui's particular ocular Jutsu allowed him to enter other's minds, and make them go through phantom experiences and manipulate them. It was so top-notch that one never even caught on to having been manipulated." Giving the old man a sadistic grin, the spectacled spy continued. "Now that is a useful tool to have. You now have two choices going forward – live by joining me and the Akatsuki and go against Konoha, or I kill you now and collect your precious eyes from you dead body."

The cloaked man shrugged in nonchalance. "After all, my benefactor only needs the eyes, not the body." He finished with an unnerving smile, as if daring Danzo to say no to the proposal.

"Hmp. And do you think you can take all three of us at one go?" Danzo sneered in reply.

"Oh... I'm not alone." Kabuto smiled once more, as two shadowy forms emerged from the woods behind him. "I'm with friends..."

Danzo's eyes widened upon seeing who Kabuto had brought with him. "How?" He asked in shock, as he witness the animated bodies of two very deceased persons standing before him.

"Edo Tensei of course." Kabuto glanced at his two creations fondly. "Now make your choice, Danzo. Join me and Akatsuki, and I can take care of your hunters. Don't join me and the results... well, as I said, I only really need your eyes."

Danzo took a moment to think over his options, he glanced briefly at his only two surviving Root members, knowing that all other members of the Root division would fight to the death, just to give him a chance to escape. There was no way around it. Even with Fuu and Torune fighting with him, it would still be very difficult to win against the Legendary White Fang (4) and Hyuuga Hizashi, brother of the Hyuuga Hiashi, a renown Jyuuken master. Finally making his decision, Danzo looked back at Kabuto unflinchingly. "I will join."

"Good. Good, then let us be on our way." Turning to his side, Kabuto opened his arms in invitation.

"Sir, the trackers are right behind us." Torune interrupted suddenly. He had left some of his Kikaichu bugs on the trail and they were telling him that their followers were not far behind and would catch up to them soon.

"Hatake Sakumo, Hyuuga Hizashi. Please take care of our pests." Motioning for Danzo to move, Kabuto started walking away. "Let us be on our way now, Danzo. My benefactor is not so patient."

Stilling for half a second, Danzo started moving after Kabuto, hoping that he would get a chance to kill the deceptive young man and somehow make his case directly in front of the Fire Daimyo. Perhaps he could even manipulate the whole situation to place himself in a possitive light, as if he was framed by Tsunade's fake information.

Having made some distance away from where they had originally stopped and discussed their options, Danzo was just about to make his move when a half white/half black man emerged from the ground before Kabuto. The man was wearing an Akatsuki cloak.

"Oh. You didn't kill him." A disappointed sound escaped the Akatsuki member. "Madara only needs the eyes."

"Yeah, I know. But I just can't be bothered right now." Kabuto shrugged again, completely unfazed by the other man. It was as if he had full confidence in himself, or that he knew Akatsuki would not punish him even though he didn't follow their orders.

Danzo gulped minutely before he refocussed his attention. /I didn't think Kabuto would be working with Akatsuki. This is bad... But not all is lost. I'm still alive. I can still manipulate the situation to meet my needs. Even if it is from within Akatsuki./ Danzo thought determinedly.

Whilst a few hundred metres behind them, a fierce battle raged between a deceased Hyuuga and the famed White Fang of Konoha on one side, and Jiraiya of the Sanin with a group of forty highly trained Jounin, Tokubetsu Jounin and Anbu operatives on the other side. Unfortunately for Jiraiya's side however, facing the Hyuuga's ultimate defence kept on pushing his forces back from pursuing Danzo further, and Hatake's Sakumo's deadly sword strikes coupled with his range of various elemental attacks kept bogging down his forces, draining them of their chakra and keeping them too busy to pursue their real target. Only 15 minutes of fighting later, the reanimated forms of Hyuuga Hizashi and Hatake Sakumo suddenly retreated, abruptly using shunshin to escape detection.

Even the Inuzuka member's famed noses couldn't follow them further. Jiraiya's team couldn't track the scent of Danzo beyond Konoha's borders, and they had no clue that the man had somehow met up with Kabuto and Zetsu, a member of the Akatsuki.

"DAMN IT! GOD DAMN IT!" Jiraiya punched the ground in frustration, knowing full well what kind of threat Danzo was with his knowledge of Konoha's security, now all in the hands of the enemy. Just thinking about what this would all mean is giving him a headache. Growling in anger, Jiraiya finally turned to his remaining troops.

The good news is that none of his troops had died, and he sure wasn't lying before about all of Danzo's bases being destroyed all at the same time. The bad news is that many of his troops were injured, some severely incapacitated at the moment. But with Tsunade and the Dokudes working together, this event would not remain a loss for his team.

"Alright men. Mission Failure. Let's report back to the Hokage." With a flick of his wrist, both he and his men darted away as the ninjas they were, towards home.

Two days later, Anko and Sasuke found themselves eyeing a complicated seal drawn from floor to roof in one of the spare operating rooms within the Konoha hospital.

"Soo... this is the seal that will get rid of the curse seal on my neck?" Anko asked tentatively.

"Yup." Samure grinned as he waved confidently at her sceptical look. "Trust me. I've done this dozens of time with Orochimaru's other experimental specimens. It works fine." Nodding at the seal, he continued. "It's originally one of the Uzumaki seals, so you can bet it's powerful. But I've augmented it so the cost in chakra is not so high. You will feel a little weak afterwards, but you'll recover soon. You will lose the boost in power that the curse seal normally gives you when you are in fights, but once you get use to that and build up some extra strength and stamina, the differences are negligible. The only thing you can't do is transform into your cursed state anymore."

Tilting his head to the side, Samure thought of something else to say in addition. "However, if you really want to keep the transformation provided by the curse seal, I do have a way around that. I did this for the former Sound four members, who now work for Juubei and the kuunoki refugees. They didn't want to lose their transformations since it gives them such a great boost in power and ability. So again, I augmented the seal to destroy Orochimaru's soul fragment (5) inside the curse seal and get rid of any harmful effects, but leave the

transformation as is. Mind you, it's still a curse seal that have detrimental effects on your body in the long term, but if you think you can handle it..." the man shrugged. "Who am I to tell you 'no'?"

In the end, Anko opted in for the full cancellation of the curse seal on her neck whilst Sasuke tentatively asked for the half-seal version, having decided to keep his winged transformation due to the edge it gives him in battle, similar to the Ex-Sound four members.

At the Hokage Tower, Tsunade was drowning her sorrows in alcohol. Surely, with the mess she has to deal with on a daily basis, she deserves to be drunk on the job once in a while. Unfortunately, today was also not her day. Before her stood Hyuuga Hiashi, the current head of the Hyuuga Clan, and Hatake Kakashi, the infamous Copy-Cat Ninja, both of whom she was about to give them the bad news.

Taking one final gulp from the bottle, Tsunade steeled herself to explain why she had called these two men here. "Two days ago, I permitted a mission to raid Danzo's hidden bunkers of Root Ninja. We were meant to kill off all of his reserve troops and recover any weaponry. What we found, I will not disclose. However, there was enough evidence to get the daimyo to order immediate termination of Danzo. Unfortunately, Danzo escaped the purge. More importantly, he had help. Yakushi Kabuto was seen in the vicinity of Konoha recently and was scented being near Danzo when the man escaped. We tried to pursue the two but were held off by two men. Two deceased and reanimated men using the same Edo Tensei technique, that Orochimaru used over three years ago against Sarutobi Sensei."

Having stayed quite throughout most of the speech, Kakashi couldn't help but inquire. "Who were these men, Hokage-sama?"

"Hyuuga Hizashi and Hatake Sakumo. Both disappeared after holding off my troops for long enough to let Danzo and Kabuto to escape." Tsunade answered grimly. The silence that followed was

thick; no one wanted to hear that a precious family member had been brought back to life only to be used against their home.

"We now have a conundrum, gentlemen. If Kabuto was able to revive Konoha's White Fang and Hyuuga Hizashi, who else is he able to revive using the Edo Tensei technique? Has he already revived other potential soldiers? What are his current forces of dead soldiers? Will they all be from Konoha or other nations as well? Worst yet, we believe he now works for Akatsuki; the same Akatsuki we are trying to take down with the rest of the Great Nations." Each word that left Tsunade's mouth caused more anxiety in the two men that stood before her.

"I'm going to have to bring this up with the Shinobi Five Nation Alliance. This is going to go down like a lead balloon." She concluded with another big gulp of alcohol.

Itachi frowned at the wet paper he held in his hand. Behind him, he could hear Akiko stifling her laughter. His frown deepened. "This is not a laughing matter." He muttered.

Giving up trying to hide her giggles, Akiko gave out a hearty laugh at her companion. "It's hilarious! I can't believe you're now water natured! It's the opposite of your previous Fire Nature as an Uchiha."

"Yes, I am aware." Gritting his teeth, Itachi continued to frown as the full implications of this situation came to ahead.

This meant that all of his Fire Elemental Jutsu repertoire will be weakened considerable. The body that he currently inhabits is water natured, the opposite of what he was used to. He'd need to relearn nature manipulation and rebuild his catalogue of Jutsus, especially his collection of Water Jutsus. He also lost the Sharingan and all of its abilities. He felt as if he is restarting as a Genin all over again. At least he hasn't lost his reflexes. Having spent the last few weeks rebuilding his chakra control, stamina, strength, balance, shuriken and kunai handling instincts as well as his Taijutsu skills, Itachi is

happy to say that at the moment, he would probably rate as a high Genin or a low Chuunin in power. If only his new body was Fire natured, then he wouldn't be in such a disadvantaged situation.

Sighing and shrugging his shoulders in defeat. /Well, nothing I can do about it now./ He thought to himself. "So" Glancing back and looking at his partner, Itachi asked. "What should I do?"

Akiko gave a final giggle before she smiled at him. "I'll just ask Mishizu (6) to station with us for a bit to give you some basic training. Maybe you can even learn a bit of water bending as well (7). With your Sharingan eye, I'm sure you've previously copied the hand seals of Water Jutsu you've seen before, especially that big shark man you use to always hang out with. It's just a matter of remembering what those hand seals are, and practicing it. As long as you work hard, I'm sure it won't take you long to get the hang of things." Grinning happily, she hopped toward his side. "In the meantime, how about I give you a crash course on how to become a Sage, using Nature Chakra instead."

Slowly, Itachi grinned back at her confidently. "You're on."

"Tobi is on an adventure! Tobi is on an ADVENTURE!" Sang the hyperactive shinobi as he hopped from branch to branch, driving his battle partner in the air bonkers.

Deidara gritted his teeth with a vengeance. /GOD DAMN IT! WILL HE JUST SHUT UP! Why am I stuck with this IDIOT AGAIN!? I so miss Ruri, she was so much calmer and useful than this dead beat! Why oh why do I have to do this mission with Tobi of all people?!/ Deidara lamented mentally. Both he and Tobi had been sent to the North, to infiltrate Kumo and collect the Hachibi Jinchuriki, who just so happen to be the Raikage's younger brother.

/Just because I've been the most successful collector of Jinchuriki so far, does not mean he can work me to the ground like this. Can't I get a vacation or something?! Man, I don't get paid enough to put up

with this shit./ Deidara continued to grumble mentally and completely missed the entrance of a new ally.

"Yo! Where are you two headed off to?" A voice called out to the two.

"Hey! Hey! It's Kisame!" Tobi voiced in surprise and happiness. Disappearing and reappearing by the Shark man's side, he patted the man's bandage wrapped shoulder. "Looking pretty good for a dead guy, Kisame-sempai."

Kisame swatted Tobi's hands away. "Who the hell are you calling dead?"

Deidara lowered his bird summon to the ground just before their formerly missing comrade. "You were late getting back, and the boss wasn't happy. Zetsu couldn't find you either, so we all thought you died. What the fuck happened?" He asked directly.

"Well, it was a surprisingly difficult battle (8)." Kisame consented.

((FLASHBACK))

Kapasu Juro (9) had been a weak ninja when he first entered the Kuunoki Chuunin Exam, with no will nor ambition to fight let alone live the life of a ninja. However, having watched his teammates (Harate Echiko and Harate Eiji) killed and maimed right in front of him by Hoshigaki Kisame, the boy's outlook on life changed drastically. Gone were the fear and reluctance against fighting; and physically, the boy looked like a hardened warrior. All his muscles were firm and distinct, eyes ever glaring and cold as he focused completely on Kisame.

"Hoshigaki Kisame. By the name of the Godaime Mizukage, I, Kapasu Juro will take your head..." The boy stated almost tonelessly.

Kisame glanced at the boy and almost laughed out loud. "Yeah, you and whose army?" He asked jokingly, not believing that this boy was a threat to him.

Juro said no more, he simply pulled out the sword he carried from his back and aimed it at Kisame. Kisame's smile slipped when he recognized that sword.

"That's the Tsunami no Sakebu (Wave's Cry), where did you get that sword from? Last I heard, it was still with that old dog that follows the previous Mizukage around like a loyal pet." Kisame asked with a serious tone of voice, but Juro did not answer.

In a blink of an eye, Kisame raised his own sword to block Juro's. Unfortunately for Samehade, the Tsunami no Sakebu emits no external Chakra at this point and therefore, there was no Chakra for Samehade to absorb. Like all famous swords of the Mist, the Tsunami no Sakebu can resonate with its wielder's Chakra, but unlike other swords, this sword contains that Chakra inside itself, not leaking any out, which makes it incredibly difficult if not impossible to absorb the Chakra out of the instrument. After this initial clash, the two swordsmen jumped away only to shunshin to another site of the clearing to clash swords once more. This time, Juro was in the air slashing down, whilst Kisame was beneath him blocking. In another split second, it was Juro who had his sword raised in a block as Kisame slammed Samehade against the thin looking sword in a diagonal slash. The two swords were locked and their two wielders glared at one another. The two swordsmen clashed a few more times before they backed away from each other once more to reassess the situation.

"Looks like I'll have to take this up a notch." Kisame muttered and suddenly multiple spikes slashed their way out of the bandages that once held Samehade's sharp edges back, revealing the true form of the sword. /It has been such a long time since I've fought a real swordsman. Alright Kisame. Let this fight just be between Swordsmen's, no Ninjutsu or Genjutsu. Let's see what skills you have, kid./

His opponent, not to be outdone, also released the true form of the Tsunami no Sakebu. With a flick of the boy's wrists, the segmented parts of the sword suddenly disconnected from one another,

elongating the sword's sharp edges and moving in thin air, as if it too had a mind of its own (10). With another flick of the wrists, the whip like sword parts twisted around and flew straight towards Kisame. But the Shark man was ready, he took aim and slapped Samehade against the opposing sword, directing the tip of the whip-sword upwards and away from his main body, then he quickly ran towards his opponent, hoping to attack the boy whilst his sword was aimed away at the moment.

Juro did not seem concerned however. Moving the arm that is holding the handle of his sword left and right quickly, he manipulated the end-half of his whip-like sword to twist in front of him creating a twisted but strong shield blocking Samehade as it slammed down towards him. Using his Chakra manipulation within the strings holding the sword parts together, Juro pulled back the tip of his sword, forcing it to do a sudden u-turn and fly straight back at Kisame, aiming for the man's back.

Seeing that his assault was blocked, Kisame rotated his body and using his body weight, he pushed Juro (sword and all) to the right, forcing the boy off his feet. In the same rotation, he twisted around just in time to back-hand the sword tip of the Tsunami no Sakebu away from his back once more.

Being pulled off his feet by the bigger and stronger enemy, Juro twisted his body in mid-air, completing two whole rotations. As a result, the Tsunami no Sakebu twisted with his body creating a cocoon around him, protecting him when Kisame attempted to jab at him with Samehade again. Instead of successfully shredding the boy, Kisame ended up batting the metallic cocoon (surrounded by his sword) away as if he had batted a ball away.

Releasing himself from his protective cocoon, Juro twisted and used chakra on his feet to absorb his landing onto the ground. Once he got his footing, he prepared for his next move. Holding tightly to this sword on the right hand, his fingers then started vibrating and undulating quickly. So quickly was its movement, that it creates a rippling affect. Soon, his wrist was vibrating, followed by his lower

arm, then his upper arm and shoulders (11). Eventually, it looked like his entire right arm was rippling, it was rising and falling so fast it looked like there were after images. Following in the pattern of his vibrating limb, the Tsunami no Sakebu also started rippling in thin air, creating a soft humming noise as it shook in the air, along with its wielder.

"Well, well, well. It's been a loooong time since I've heard the Tsunami no Uta (Wave's Song). Looks like I'm in the presence of a master." Kisame praised even as he tightened his grip on Samehade.

He may have been one of the strongest members of the Seven Mist Swordsman, but that title is not entirely accurate. He's more of a Ninjutsu specialist than he is a swordsman (12). If you are only comparing swordsmanship skills on its own, this Juro character has him beat. There are only a rare few people in the world who had ever made the Tsunami no Sakebu sing, and Kisame is not of one of those people. His strength lies in his Chakra capacity, and high synchronization rate with Samehade, to the point where he could merge with the demon sword. But as a swordsman, he pales in comparison to his other compatriots, like Zabuto or this boy.

The fact that the boy had mastered this rippling effect and was able to make his sword sing, it's a true showcase of the boy's skills.

"Dance to the rhythm of the waves". Juro spoke for the second time to Kisame before he prepared his next attack. Pulling his rippling arm straight up towards the sun, the effect was immediate. The Tsunami no Sakebu flipped up and then zig-zagged up and down in a twisted vertical fashion towards Kisame in an un-predictable, almost rotational manner, all the while still rippling and producing that humming sound as it moves through the air. Kisame tried to block with Samehade but due to the rippling affect, the opposing sword seems to bounce, screech against Samehade and redirect itself at Kisame from a different angle, all within a split second, resulting in a deep cut to Kisame whenever he was unsuccessful in his blocks.

Juro was relentless in his assault; he controlled his sword with precision and made his whip twist around Kisame, constantly cutting him deeply in spots that the man was unable to protect. Each contact by the rippling whip felt like something had drilled across his skin, clawing shredded marks across his flesh and leaving deep wounds. If it wasn't for Samehade constantly feeding Kisame Chakra to heal himself, he really wasn't sure how much worse he would fare against his opponent. /Okay, this isn't getting me anywhere. He's definitely the better swordsman. I can't win if I continue like this. Now's the time to throw in some Ninjutsu)./

Dodging another strike as best he can, Kisame tried to escape the whip surrounding him to give himself some space to perform his specialty Ninjutsu, but Juro wasn't going to give him a chance to escape. Somehow, Juro sped up his rippling arm technique, which caused his sword to move even faster. In just one blink in time, Kisame suddenly found himself slashed in several areas. When before he could still see and somewhat counter the attacks, now it felt like he was being attacked by invisible drills all across his body none stop. /I've got to stop this sword technique somehow./

What he came up with wasn't the best plan but it was the only one he could think of. Angling his body, Kisame somehow aimed it just so, that he ended up with the tip of the Tsunami no Sakebu stabbed right into his shoulder. Using one hand to grip the rippling head of the sword to stop it from escaping, he used Samehade to try to stop the undulating of the rest of the sword parts as he rushes his way towards his opponent once more.

Surprised at Kisame's sudden move, Juro was not prepared when Kisame slammed Samehade into his chest and shredded it pretty badly. Unfortunately for Kisame, Juro also used the last of strength slash back at Kisame with his sword. Eventually, both swordsmen were severely injured, losing large chunks of flesh and bleeding literary everywhere.

With Juro now incapacitated (suffering a shredded chest to the point where his ribs/chest plate and some organs were visible) and dying

on the ground (13), Kisame had the painful job of pulling the head of the Tsunami no Sakebu out from his shoulder. The tip of that sword was shaped in such a way that it was easy to stab in, but difficult to pull out. By the time Kisame managed to pull the sword out of his shoulder, his shoulder was almost completely ripped off from the rest of his body.

((END FLASHBACK))

"I got pretty badly injured and lost a bit of blood, so I hid myself to recuperate. Anyway, enough about me, what are you two up to?" Kisame finished his story.

"We're hunting the Hachibi! It's gonna be an adventure! Tobi is a good boy, so boss asked Tobi to do him a favor! Do you want to join in the fun, Kisame-sempai?" Tobi asked in a childishly excited voice.

Thinking over it a bit, Kisame shrugged. "Sure, I've got nothing else to do."

Deidara frowned at him, glancing specifically at the bandaged shoulder. "You sure you can handle that?"

Kisame nodded at the man. "I'm fine."

Turning, he headed towards the north again and heard Tobi following behind him in a skip, whilst Deidara obviously floated back into the air. "So, anyone else heard anything about Itachi? I couldn't find him after the battle." He mentioned briefly in question.

It was Deidara who answered back surprisingly. "No news at all. Even Zetsu couldn't find him. It is assumed that he died. Just like we thought you died."

Thinking about it briefly, Kisame shook his head. "Nah... That man has a strong will to live. I'll keep on believing that he is in fact alive. For now..."

It didn't take the three long to reach their destination.

"According to Zetsu-san. The Hachibi is located at the Lightning Gorge training. Should Tobi go in there and scare the Habibi out? Should he?" Tobi hopped as he stepped beside Kisame.

Pausing without looking at Tobi, Kisame's gaze focused straight ahead. "No need. Looks like he was waiting for us." Standing before him was none other than the Hachibi Jinchuriki, Bee.

Recognizing the Akatsuki cloaks worn by the two men standing before him, Bee confidently waved his arms around. "When you've got power to spare, you shine, you glare! The Eight-Tails is the quintessential Killer Bee! Hip-Hip Hurray!" Before he could say anymore for his introduction, a white spider form fell on his face and exploded at point blank range.

"Don't forget about me, ya Bitch. I'm your actual opponent here!" Deidara shouted down from his height in the air, hating the fact that he was completely ignored.

"Ahh. Don't feel left out, there's enough of him for all three of us to share." Kisame laughed at the former Stone Ninja. "But looks like he's more interested in fighting me than you, so why don't you let me have a go first. You're more of a support type fighter anyway." Kisame stepped forward towards to the Jinchuriki.

Above him, Deidara could only grit his teeth and glare. "Che."

Bee managed to survive the small explosion at point blank range with no superficial injuries. Pulling out eight of his swords, he flung them into the air and then caught each of them on any available body part – teeth, neck, underarm, behind the knees, elbow and hip. Jumping towards his enemies, he started spinning, creating a human chainsaw heading towards the two standing Akatsuki members before him.

"Whoa!" Tobi jumped away into safety, whilst Kisame blocked the assault with Samehada, who was enjoying feeding on the Chakra running through all the swords from Bee.

"I dance like a butterfly. I'm the 8 Tails, I sting like a bee." Bee happily rap as he continued to coordinate all 8 of his swords to fight against Kisame, he released a bit more chakra on his swords to try and overpower Kisame, but that only led his chakra to be consumed by the demonic sword. Completely focused on his fight with the former Mist Shinobi, Bee was again distracted when another spider fell on his back. But this time, instead of waiting for it to explode, Bee stabbed it with one of his available swords and ran lightning enhanced chakra through it, neutralizing the explosive element before flinging the spider away from his body. Unfortunately for Bee, whilst he was busy dealing with the spider, Kisame was able to jump away to give himself some breathing room. At the same time, he flung Samehada at the Jinchuriki who had to dodge the dangerous weapon.

"Hmpt. Supporting fighter my ass! Looks like you can't even handle him yourself. If you were that injured from the previous fight, I'd suggest you leave this to me!" Deidara arrogantly commented, feeling tired of saving his ass all the time. He wasn't even Deidara's partner in crime. If Tobi wasn't such a wimp in straight out fights, Deidara wouldn't have to be do so much work.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, I will now take this fight more seriously." Kisame apologised, which surprised all his compatriots. When Bee released more chakra, creating a seven tailed chakra cloak around him to protect him, both he and Kisame ran towards each other. Bee made to jump over the Shark man and attack from behind but once again, all of his chakra was eaten by Samehada. As a result, the sword grew in size and eventually ripped its way out of the bandages.

Having his chakra absorbed multiple times now, Bee thought to himself as he calculated how much chakra he actually lost to the thing. /So the amount that thing can eat in one go is six tails worth of

chakra. Well, let's go with version 2 then. Hachibi, lend me a hand will ya?/

In an instant, Bee's body turned black and took the form of a horned bull with the lower body of an octopus. /Instant Bijuu transformation?/ This thought rang through all the Akatsuki member's minds as they witness the work of the perfect Jinchuriki.

"LARIAT!" With a single jump, Bee slammed his elbow into Kisame's chest, breaking his rib cage and chest organs, flinging the man to slam against a giant rock across from him. Even whilst this was happening, Samehade was happily gulping down on Bee's new chakra transformation, forcing Bee to return to his previous normal chakra cloak.

/To be able to take me back into this version, that sword must really have a high endurance when it comes to eating./ Bee thought to himself.

"Kisame-Sempai!" Tobi transported himself to Kisame, standing in front of him, as if protecting him from the Jinchuriki. Even Deidara was surprised at the power of the attack. Kisame was bleeding profusely against the rock, his chest area bloody and decimated.

"Now you really did it." Surprisingly, Kisame wasn't fazed at all by his injury. "When I'm facing an amazingly strong opponent, I'm also getting stronger in the same proportion. I won't tire and I won't die. That's why I've been called the tailless Bijuu." Before everyone's eyes, his seemingly devastating injuries started healing, soon, there was only a small blemish on his bluish skin. Nodding his head to the side, indicating to Tobi to leave this fight to him, Kisame lifted his hands to create a hand seal. "Suiton: Big Water Wave Bombing!" A lake full of water burst out of Kisame's mouth and formed a gigantic round body of water submerging both Kisame and Bee. Tobi simply transported himself out of the dimension, whilst Deidara remained high up in the sky. Grabbing the ridiculously large Samehade, Kisame started merging with the demonic sword, fusing together and forming a monstrous shark like body.

Bee tried to escape the watery prison by heading out towards one side, but he found that the body of water was moving with Kisame as the center. So when Kisame followed him, the body of water expanded towards his direction. Changing direction, Bee started heading up, hoping that he'll blast out of the globe from above. Behind him, Kisame increased his speed to catch up to the Jinchuriki. As the two beings raced towards the top of the body of water, the formation of the water prison also changed, elongating with them to form a strange cone-like shape. The cone-like shape got thinner and thinner as the two moved further and further up, thinning out the walls surrounding the two fighters and possibly giving Bee a chance to escape. Kisame couldn't let this happen, so focusing more chakra into his technique, he changed the shape of the water prison once more, making it into a complete sphere and having it float in the air (14) instead of sitting on the ground and moving wherever he goes.

Seeing his chance of escape disappearing, Bee turned around to face Kisame once more. The two bodies slammed into each other inside the water. Kisame's body formed spikes and stabbed into Bee to try and suck Bee's chakra, and Bee formed octopus tentacles from his behind and grabbed onto Kisame with suckers. Bee used his physical strength to punch and kick Kisame's body from his own, releasing him from the spikes on Kisame's body. Upon freeing himself, he summoned forth a large cloud of ink, staining all the water black and completely blinding all views within the watery prison. Unfortunately for Bee, when Kisame is fused with Samehada, he can feel other people's chakras.

"Suiton: Goshoku Zame! (Water Release: Five Shark Feeding Frenzy)" Five shark summons appeared in the water and were just about to attack the swimming Bee.

Bee knew he was in trouble and had to use his ultimate technique. He summoned forth all of Hachibi's power, taking on the form of the 8-tailed bijuu himself. The chakra of the bijuu was so potent that the shark summons were immediately destroyed. But releasing so much power whilst still remaining inside Kisame's prison is only giving

Kisame more chakra to absorb. Bee knew it was a double-edged sword and he must act fast in order to finish this fight. Focusing all of his potent chakra into a single point, Bee prepared his Bijuu dama (Bijuu bomb).

Watching the decimation of his sharks and knowing that the Jinchuriki was preparing for one final attack, Kisame summoned forth more sharks, over a 1000 of them. "Suiton: O Zame Dama! (Water Element, Giant Shark Bomb)!" The 1000 shark summons rotated among themselves creating a giant twister inside the water, all heading towards Bee. /My Giant Shark Bomb is no ordinary water blast. It absorbs the target's chakra to grow bigger and stronger. The stronger the enemy's technique is, the stronger my technique becomes!/"

"Bijuu dama" the single black bomb released an unimaginable amount of power, blasting away the water prison instantly, but as it smashed against Kisame's Giant Shark attack, the sharks seem to absorb some of the potent energy released by the bomb and grow bigger. However, even Kisame's sharks couldn't absorb the entirety of the Bijuu Dama. That one technique destroyed the entire water sphere, and without water, even Kisame's sharks (as big as they've grown due to absorbing the Hachibi's chakra) dissipated into thin air, sending their left over chakra to Kisame. With the watery prison gone, both Bee and Kisame fell to the ground. Bee was unconscious, but Kisame felt very high with all the amount of chakra he had absorbed.

Deidara caught the unconscious form of Bee in the grip of his giant clay bird's talons and Kisame simply summoned a bit of water to soften his landing on the ground. Annoyed that his mission had been completely taken over by Kisame, Deidara snapped at the others. "Oi. I'm taking the Jinchuriki back to the base! I'll see you all when you get there." Without any further backward glance at the other two, Deidara took off.

"But Deidara-san! Tobi is faster! Tobi can instant transmit to base!" Tobi cried out to his sempai. He looked at Kisame with giant anime

eye drops rolling down his eye hole. "Why did Deidara-sempai leave Tobi alone. Tobi doesn't like to be alone!"

Kisame shrugged. "He's probably ticked that I got all the action. It's okay though, I'll walk you back to base, or better yet, you can transport the both of us back to base." He commented neutrally.

It was at that moment that they were interrupted Zetsu, who emerged from the ground. "Sorry to interrupt, but I'm going to have to borrow Tobi for a bit." The black and white man smiled eerily at the two.

"Oh oh! Tobi is wanted? Tobi is important?!" Tobi bounced in excitement.

"Yes yes. There's someone I want Tobi to meet." Zetsu answered then asked the other. "So will you be able to walk back by yourself, Kisame? You've already finished the mission."

"That's fine, I might see if I can find some info on what happened to Itachi-san." The shark man shrugged at the aloe vera man.

"Good good. So we will see you later." With that said, both Zetsu and Tobi disappeared using Tobi's space time Ninjutsu, leaving Kisame to make his way back to the base on his own.

"What was so urgent that you needed to take me away from following up on the retrieval of the Hachibi, Zetsu? You know how important the Jinchuriki is for us at this crucial time." Madara demanded.

"I know, but Kabuto has invited another guest to join Akatsuki and considering we are running out of live members, I thought it prudent to bring this to your attention sooner rather than later." Zetsu answered with narrow eyes.

The two entered a darkened hallway only to be met with two other men. One was obviously Kabuto but the other... Madara narrowed his eyes at the older man.

"Kabuto, why have you bought Shimura Danzo to my base?" His voice was dark and threatening.

"I just thought you might have a use for Shisui's eyes, at least for now." Kabuto shrugged.

"Indeed..."

"What's this about Killer Bee!?" The Raikage was in no mood for bad news, but that was what he's hearing.

"Sire. Sincere apologies for our incompetence. Jay and I noticed Lord Killer Bee fighting not one, but three Akatsuki members, though most of the attacks were against the former Mist Shinobi, Hoshigaki Kisame. He was overwhelmed and taken by another member of Akatsuki, former Stone Nin – Deidara. We tried to follow but Deidara had taken Lord Killer Bee into the sky and we were unable to keep up. Hoshigaki Kisame seem to be travelling by foot back to their base, and Jay is following them as we speak. The third Akatsuki member, whom I could not identify due to him hiding his face behind an orange mask. He just disappeared into thin air." The Chunin reported to the Raikage as quickly as he could.

In hearing this news, the Raikage punched his own writing desk, splitting it in two before he started yelling orders to his staff. "Notify the United Ninja Alliance. Tell which ever village is closest to go after my brother. Also have them follow up on Jay's whereabouts to give him back up against that Fish Face. We've already lost Yugito, and I'll be damn if I lose my own brother. I'm going to hunt these Akatsuki down myself!"

Having sent Deidara out with Tobi to the north to face the Hachibi, Pein and Konan were slowly making their way towards Konoha. Both knew that the Kyuubi Jinchuriki was not currently residing in Konoha. However, with Zetsu unable to find the boy, they had no choice but to make the first move and await the boy to present himself. Considering that Konoha is also a refuge for the Kuunoki survivors, there is a realistic expectation that the last Uzumaki would do anything to protect his people, both Kuunoki and Konoha citizens.

Konan pushed Nagato's chair into a hollowed tree, the six paths guarding them on all sides as they travelled. Finally stopping once they were hidden inside the tree's hollow, the skeletal Nagato turned to Konan. "Can you do me a favour, Konan?"

Konan gazed surprisingly at the pale, surprisingly weak man in the chair. "You only have to ask, and I will provide. What is it you want me to do, Nagato?"

Nagato glanced briefly away. There was worry in his eyes. "Can you please go back to the Hidden Rain Village and find out where Madara is keeping Ruri?"

Konan's eyes dipped in confusion. "Why are you so worried about that woman?" She asked suspiciously.

Nagato tilted his head down. He was silent for a long time. "I've been having dreams..."

His words were perplexing. /What does that have to do with Ruri?/ Konan wondered, but she waited for him to continue his explanation.

"They are more like memories. I remember seeing Ruri, but she was only a small child under my care. I was an old man." Nagato stated, eyes frowning in concentrating. "I don't remember everything. And for a long time, I thought they were just that, dreams. But they are becoming more vivid, more real."

Taking a deep breath, Nagato closed his eyes. "I remember seeing a girl with long red hair strapped to a table (15), and Madara sitting beside her. He was old, the original Madara. Not this fake one."

Konan was surprised by his story.

"I remember pain, and a hand reaching towards me, trying to pluck out my eyes." His voice wavering. "I remember dying."

Opening his eyes once more, Nagato looked at Konan pleadingly. "I don't know who I am anymore (16)."

Konan did not know what she could say, she only leaned forward and gave her long-time friend a gentle hug. "I know who you are. You are Nagato. My best friend. My family. My home."

Nagato hugged her back as best he could. "Thank you Konan. But I need to know the truth. Am I really Nagato? And Who is Nagato? Who am I before? Where did I get these Rinnegan eyes? Ruri would know those answers. I was going to ask her when we first recruited her but I was afraid of what she would say. I was afraid of who I was, and the implications of what I've done."

Nagato once again looked at Konan with pleading eyes. "How do you think I knew the secret of the 7 high councillors of the Kuunoki? These dreams, no, these memories, they are true. If they are true, then what that does that make me?"

Konan nodded in understanding. "Alright. I'll go find her."

"Please be careful, Konan. I can't lose you too. With Tobi to the north and Zetsu out looking for the Kyuubi Jinchuriki, hopefully, there is no one to stop you from reaching Ruri. But please... be careful."

"I will." With those words, Konan scattered into a million origami paper, folding themselves into small paper cranes and fly back the way they came, towards the hidden Rain Village.

In the great city of Rain Country, a single piece of paper landed lightly on the ground, followed by another, and then another. Soon, a plethora of small square and perfectly white papers littered the grounds, climbed the walls, entered any opened windows, flying through open rooms, and exiting buildings once more. Paper was everywhere, floating through air and touching every surface, passing every nook and cranny.

Paper entered drain pipes, the sewerage system, and investigated all the underground caverns and passage ways hidden underneath the great city. Paper slipped between wall spaces among and between the sky scrapers, checking every window and every room, ever looking, ever watching, searching for something.

And one lucky piece of small paper slipped itself between a tree root and the stones that made up a wall structure deep underground. Finally, it has found what it was looking for.

A few moments later, that single piece of paper is followed by a flood of other pieces, all exactly the same size and colour. Together, they folded into one another and soon the form of Konan takes shape. Konan gazed impassively at the thin and malnourished form imprisoned before her. She waits patiently for the other to acknowledge her presence.

"Why... are you... here?" A dry and raspy voice whispered, obviously suffering from a lack of moisture for some time.

Taking pity on the former Akatsuke member, Konan floated forward towards the other. In her hand, she held a bowl made of paper, and in it water. Slowly, she tilted the paper bowl in order to let the little amount of water drip into Uzumaki's dry throat. Ruri drank slowly, savoring the much missed moisture on her lips, her tongue, her mouth and finally her throat.

After a long few minutes of drinking, followed by Ruri moving her tongue around within her mouth and rework the appendage once more. Ruri opened her eyes and focused on the other women. "Why

are you here? Zetsu and Madara will know and they will come." She warned.

"It doesn't matter what Zetsu and Madara will or will not do. I'm only here for answers; answers only you can give, Uzuamki Ruri." Konan stated calmly and with determination.

Ruri nodded her head, as much as she can whilst the vines clutched at her neck tightly. "Okay. What do you wish to know?"

Konan's eyes softened slightly. "What happened to Nagato? What did Madara do?"

Ruri gave her a weary smile. "Shouldn't you be asking who is Nagato?"

Konan's eyes darkened then. "So you already knew."

"Of course I did. I'm the Lady Oracle." Ruri's smile turned sarcastic, as if her words were the biggest jokes in the world. What was the point of being the Lady Oracle if you can't change the future?

"My uncle, Uzumaki Tenka, took custody of me, my sister and Kaga when we were very young. This was not the norm. Of course, at the time, my mother went insane and was being imprisoned herself. We were all orphans with no close Uzumaki family left. Those who lived in Uzushio had been decimated, and their bodies and souls devoured by the life stream. I had thought, at one point, we were going to be last." Now, it was Ruri's turn to look sad.

"My uncle did his best to raise us on his own. He wasn't that old at the time, age-wise, but he did look old. That I remember. I always thought it was the stress. His eyes could see more than me. He could see what was going to happen, and he couldn't change it. What it must have been like to see your own death, know it with every fiber of your being that you will die, and also know exactly when, where and how you will die, what you will feel when you die, all of it. I was young, and I could not comprehend it; how alone he

must have felt." Moving her eyes away from Konan, there was a small amount of tears glistening in the corners of Ruri's eyes. "We were both members of the Prophet house, but to tell you the truth, as talented as I was in the arts, I could not see my own death. Even now, I do not know if, when and how I will die... But my uncle knew his."

"Once, he had trained me and Kaga to an appropriate level, he left us. He left the Kuunoki. And for the first time in all our history, the 7 Councillors did not object for a member of the Uzumaki Prophet family to die outside the Kuunoki, and not have his body returned for the Life-merge ceremony. He did not tell us what was happening, why he left. And for a long time, I did not understand. I did try to use my gifts (the Yochigan) to search for him, but I could find nothing. He was just gone, disappeared. It wasn't until much later that I realized my gift was blocked by the very system I'm using in order to see the past and the future – the life stream. The 7 Councillors manipulated the life stream so that no information about my uncle's whereabouts would flow to me." A bitter smile slowly grew on Ruri's face. "That's when I realized I needed to destroy the whole system, in order to be free."

Looking up at Konan, Ruri's smile changed from being bitter to a sudden empty smile, a fake smile. "It was a set up. Uncle Tenka went to Uchiha Madara, in order to delay his plans, to delay everything. Madara had captured Uzumaki Kushina, the then holder of the Kyuubi, but Uncle interfered with the seal. He made it so that it could not break, would not break, not until the time was right anyway. Madara and Zetsu defeated and killed my uncle, and then they tried to revive him again. That life clone is Uzuamki Nagato. His eyes however, belong to my uncle Tenka. Somehow, during the transplant of eyes, it activated the legendary doujutsu – Rinnegan. Nagato was to become their puppet from the very start. His life, like mine, was staged; forged and manipulated into becoming exactly who we were supposed to become."

"Eventually, the seal in Kushina weakened over time, and it broke at the exact destined time it was supposed to... when my sister resided in Konoha, when my nephew was born." Ruri finished her story with a sad shake of her head. "Now you know the truth. We both played our parts perfectly. In trying to protect our own loved ones, we... we lost ourselves."

Konan remained silent. Now, she understood why Nagato had felt that he needed to recruit Ruri. At the time, she did not understand her comrade's decision. Why would he go so far to recruit someone so difficult to recruit in the first place? None of the others had received a personal invite from Nagato either. At a subconscious level, Nagato knew Ruri was family. And family required you to go the extra mile. Ruri too, Konan finally understood the disjointed personality of the once Lady Oracle once she was out of her cage. Having lived her entire life under the pretence of obedience, it must have been so overwhelming to be free for the first time. To be free to choose what you want to do, and know that it was your own choice, not one put on you by others.

Decision made, Kona summoned forth some of her paper pieces, folding them to create sharpened edges and formed paper shurikens. They spun as they flew towards the vines holding Ruri in place. Within seconds, they sliced through Ruri's confinement and Ruri fell to her knees on the floor, having not expected the sudden move. She looked up at Konan with a grateful but also fearful look. "Madara and Zetsu would not let this go. I am still useful to them. By freeing me now, you would make an enemy of them."

"I was never their ally. I am only the ally of Nagato." Konan answered succinctly.

"I see now where your loyalties lie." A third voice rang out from behind them. Immediately, both Konan and Ruri turned their gazes to the intruder of our conversation. Both felt their nerves rise at the sight of Tobi standing firmly with his single Sharingan eye glaring at the two women.

Glaring back, Konan fully manifested her true body and turned around to face Tobi. Without looking back at Ruri, she ordered the other women to escape. "Make your escape now, Ruri. I will hold Madara off for as long as I can."

"No, it should be you who should escape. You need to go back to Nagato!" Ruri snapped back, knowing instinctively that she was nothing more than a burden to the other women, and that Konan should be the one to escape.

"I will not allow a member of Nagato's family to be hurt. You are family, and as his friend, it is my duty to protect you. Go!" With those as Konan's last words, she flicked her arms up and instantly, an army of paper filled the room, obscuring Tobi's gaze on the two women. Ruri found herself wrapped up into a paper mummy and quickly moved out of the enclosed cavern. Konan too had slipped her way outside the confines of the room, quickly making her way outside.

Unfortunately for Konan however, Tobi used his spare time Ninjutsu to suddenly reappear before her in mid-air. Konan flung several paper shuriken at Tobi only for him to turn transparent allowing the paper shuriken to fly through him. Konan's form dissipated into paper again only to reform closer to the water's surface of the river that flows around the main city of Rain Country. Once again, Tobi re-emerged before her, stopping her escape.

Forming paper wings behind her, Konan launched herself at Tobi, flinging a multitude of paper shurikens at the man. And once again, none of the paper shurikens touched Tobi, until the moment he reached up and grabbed Konan by the throat. Instantly, she formed a paper sword in her hand and made to stab Tobi. Tobi used his other hand to grab Konan's wrist that was holding the paper sword. Around them, paper swirled, and she activated the explosive notes that she hid inside her storm of flying paper.

/She hid Explosive Tags!/ Catching the distinctive seals glowing on some of the paper, Tobi activated Kamui in order to suck all the

explosives away from him. But he was only partially successful. Having never thought that Konan would be this strong, he had underestimated her, and in his folly, he lost one arm (the arm that was holding her neck), and the other hand was severely burnt. Glaring at the moment, Tobi couldn't help but taunt. "Seems you were planning to blow yourself up just as I was sucking you in, and to take me down with you. But you failed. I was faster than you. I managed to suck away the explosion. Though I did get hit a bit. You were also saved because I sucked it away... You ought to thank me."

Calmly, Konan lifted her hand up towards Tobi. "Madara. You have played with our lives for too long. This time, I choose freedom. It is my choice to fight you. It is my will alone to take you down to hell with me. I will not allow you to manipulate and hurt Nagato anymore!" With these words, the river beneath Tobi's feet split open like the parting of the seas, and below the watery surface, Tobi could see millions upon millions of explosive tags hidden beneath the river. His eyes widened in disbelief as he started falling towards the bottom of the river.

Tobi tried to recall his body back into his own dimension with Kamui, but he quickly noticed how Konan is controlling the explosive tags to fly towards him and attach to his body. Had he tried to teleport, he would have needed to materialise fully into this dimension and that meant giving Konan a chance to blow him up. However, he couldn't stay in his semi-intangible state for too long either. 5 minutes is the maximum length of time he can stay in this form between dimensions, allowing people to see and hear him but not allowing anything to touch him. Having run out of time, Tobi cracked open the other side of his mask, revealing his second Sharingan eye; just in time as all the explosives tags started exploding around him.

Minutes went by and all you could hear was an unending symphony of explosions, one after another creating a cacophony of noise and destruction. Eventually, even Konan ran out of explosive tags and she allowed her Sacred Paper Emissary Jutsu to wither and die,

letting the river flow back to the way it was before. "It is done, Nagato." She panted as she said these words.

Unfortunately for her, Tobi re-materialize right behind her and stabbed a broken pipe right through her heart. "Yes, it is done, indeed. Thank you for all your years of loyal service, Konan."

Gritting her teeth, Konan grabbed hold of the pipe, holding Tobi in place. Using her will, she summoned forth her paper wings once again and arched them towards Tobi, hoping to stab him whilst he was fully materialised in this world. Dodging the paper wings stretching to stab him, Tobi jumped back.

Releasing her wings and forming two swords, one in each hand instead, Konan staggered slightly in her attempt to swing at Tobi with her paper sword, hoping once again to stab or slash at him. Tobi ducked under her swing and kicked at the pipe that was still protruding from her chest. Konan yelled out in pain, momentarily losing her concentration on the formation of her swords. Tobi took this opportunity to trip Konan by swiping at her feet. Losing her balance Konan toppled over and fell into the river, having lost her concentration on balancing her chakra to keep her on the water's surface due to the heavy blood lost.

Tobi drove his lone and burnt hand beneath the water to follow in her descent, and grabbed onto her throat once more. As he squatted on the surface of the river, Tobi tightened his grip on her throat with his burnt hand, willing her to drown sooner rather than later.

Konan tried to struggle, tried to summon any last ounce of chakra to her aid. But with the blood lost, the pain, and the lack of oxygen, she soon suffocated whilst glaring at her opponent on the other side of the water. It was like a mirror image (17). He - who was darkness, was standing in the sun; she herself - whom she would like to think is light, is submerged beneath the water, being suffocated by the darkness that surrounds her. How poetic. This is a reflection of her world. Every day was a struggle to maintain her light in a world of darkness. Has she proven her existence? Has she proven that even

her tiny bit of light can live in this darkened world, can thrive and beat back the darkness?

Finally losing her battle for air, Konan died due to a combination of strangulation and suffocation. Tobi released his grip on her neck and allowed Konan to slowly drift down into the bottom of the river of her home.

In a tunnel far away from the river, Zetsu hovered over the unconscious form of Ruri. Sure, the former Lady Oracle had tried to make her escape, but she had been imprisoned over the last 3 to 4 weeks, receiving limited food and water. Not to mention she was incredibly low on chakra, having most of her chakra absorbed by the vines that held her prisoner. It was easy for Zetsu to overwhelm her in her weakened state.

Miles away, on the border of Fire country, Pein gazed worriedly at the origami flower in his hand. A gift from his dear friend from so long ago. It was a paper rose given by Konan when they were children, held together by Konan's will and chakra. It was in that moment, as he watched transfixed, the paper flower wilted right before his eyes, and then it disintegrated. Without chakra holding its form together, the paper from over two decades ago rotted away to nothing.

Pein knew then, that his friend was gone. Tilting his face to the sky, he was glad that the heavens opened up and started raining on his face, allowing his own tears to join them in their descent to the earth. For a long time, Pein mourned in silence. But soon enough, another emotion manifested inside his ribcage. RAGE.

Perhaps heaven had felt what he felt, and decided to grant his wish. For before his eyes, Tobi materialized through Kamui with another man in a dark cloak standing behind him. The man was still missing an arm and a cracked mask. He looked like he'd been through hell, a sure sign that it had been him whom had fought Konan.

"You killed Konan." The six paths of Pein and Nagato all glared at Tobi with unholy rage.

"You betrayed me." Tobi answered with just as much coldness in his voice.

Before the two could launch into their fights, the third interloper removed the cloak covering his face, revealing himself to be Danzo, who unlike before did not have bandages covering his eyes. One eye was black, the other had the Sharingan. Pein glared at his two opponents, but without him realizing it, Danzo's Sharingan eye was special and it was already having an effect on him. After all, this eye once belonged to Uchiha Shisui. And even with Pein's Rinnegan eyes, he was susceptible to Danzo's Mangakyo Sharingan eye's manipulation.

Silence reined.

A good half hour later, both Danzo and Tobi blinked their eyes in tiredness. "It is done. It may have taken two Mangakyo Sharingans (18) but we have managed to overcome and now control the Six Paths of Pein."

Walking towards Nagato and his surrounding undead soldiers, Tobi gave his orders to his former comrade, now puppet. "Go to Konoha. Destroy Konoha. Seek the Kyuubi Jinchuriki and bring him back."

"Hai."

Bee twitched, quickly gaining consciousness with the help of his bijuu's healing. Unfortunately for him, Deidara was already prepared for this and jabbed him with a needle full of special tranquilizer, guaranteed to knock a Jinchuriki out for several hours, if not a day. /Thank God I still had these special shots that Ruri had prepared before she disappeared!/ Deidara thought to himself as he looked at the empty syringe. As a medical specialist and a master in demonic chakra, Ruri had prepared a few doses of these injections, purposely

made to combat a Jinchuriki's quick restoration. They were able to keep a Jinchuriki weak and unconscious, and Ruri had given him a few syringes just in case. With the latest jab he had given the Hachibi Jinchuriki, that was the last of the lot he had.

Deidara sighed again, missing the one partner that he worked well with. If only he could figure out where she had disappeared too, he thought to himself. It seemed quite suspicious that none of the other Akatsuki members asked after her. She was the Lady Oracle, sure she hadn't been working with them for long, but during the short time that she did work with them, she did a good job. Not to mention, Pein went through all the trouble of getting her to join in the first place, it seems illogical that no one was going after her or even curious about her disappearance. Of course, she could be dead, but Deidara was annoyed that no one had decided to tell him anything. He humped in annoyance at the whole situation, completely baffled and focused in his own thoughts, he was not paying an ounce of attention on his surroundings. That was why he was completely caught off guard as a shadow above him grew bigger and bigger before it darkened his view. Looking up, he saw two gigantic human hands mere meters away from him.

"Baika no Jutsu! (Multi-size Technique)." Just a few seconds ago, Chouji had jumped off one of Sai's Ink bird summons directly above Deidara and his hostage. He and the others on his team had followed after them when they had spotted Deidara's flying clay bird from a distance away. Konoha had received the missive from the Raikage just an hour ago, and a search and rescue team had been organised to pursue the enemy soon after. On the team was Hyuuga Neji (who had the best eyes to sight the enemy), Sai (though still recovering from his mental breakdown some weeks ago, he is a very valuable member on the team with the use of his ink summoning), Nara Shikamaru (who is the team lead of this mission and the one charged with capturing both the Akatsuki enemy and rescuing the hostage), followed by last but not least Akimichi Chouji.

With a giant falling down on top of him, Deidara had no chance to escape. Even if he tried to move away, there was just no time for him to do so. As Chouji's giant of a body slammed into Deidara, summon and all, Chouji used one hand to grab Deidara tightly, trapping his arms and not allowing him to move them. Chouji's other hand took hold of the unconscious form of Bee.

"Katsu!" Deidara mentally directed his only existing clay summon to self-destruct, but unfortunately for him, Chouji's body is too big for the explosion to have much effect on him.

Within seconds, gigantic Chouji body slams onto the hard ground, literally slapping Deidara's trapped form onto the surface of the earth as part of the impact. Whilst the other hand held onto Bee as gently and firmly as he could. When Chouji impacted the earth, it caused quite a big earth quake, flattening the ground below him instantly and caused a large plume of dust to fly up into the air. Less than a second after the impact, Chouji released his technique and quickly shrunk back to his normal body size. Sai's bird had also swooped down towards the ground, allowing both Neji and Shikamaru to drop onto the earth. "Chouji, you okay?" Shikamaru called out as he couldn't see his best friend anyway in the dust cloud.

Cough. Cough. "I'm okay. Gonna stay here with the Cloud nin. You guys go after the Akatsuki guy."

"Kay. Stay here with Sai and don't move." Shikamaru ordered as he quickly followed in Neji's shadow. With his Byakugan activated, Neji was the only one who could find where Deidara had landed and both Neji and Shikamaru were needed to incapacitate the bomb user.

"Ugh..." Deidara groaned in pain. /Everything hurts.../ he complained mentally as he slowly tried to drag himself up onto his feet even though his head was ringing. He knew that he had to move now or else he was dead, and dead men can't produce any art no more. Slowly and with unsteady motions, Deidara pushed himself up with one shaking hand, only to notice that both his legs were crushed in the impact and were not responding at all. /Well... Looks like this is

the end for me./ He couldn't really concentrate due to the shock and pain of the impact, but he knew that if he couldn't move, he would only be a sitting duck. /Oh well...Let's go out with a bbbiiiiigggg bang then./ His pale, tired and pained face morphed into a sadistic grin.

Hearing the rushing footsteps of his incoming enemy, Deidara raised both his hands with their mouths wide open in preparation. He then spat out several explosive birds all in mid-flight soaring straight to his enemies. Neji didn't even pause in his rush, as he quickly and efficiently used his Jyuken moves to lightly tap against each of the clay birds flying towards him.

"Wha?" Mouth open, Deidara was completely shocked at how efficient Neji was in injecting his own chakra into Deidara's clay constructions, completely neutralizing Deidara's ability to activate the explosives inside. He thought only lightning users could neutralize his own rock affiliated abilities, but he was wrong.

Following up from neutralizing Deidara's portable bombs, Neji closed in on Deidara and within moments, he closed all the Tenketsus on both Deidara's arms, disabling the man's ability to form more explosive constructs. However, even with his arms and legs disabled, Deidara wasn't completely vulnerable. Opening his mouth, Deidara released a hidden clay spider construct which quickly jumped onto Neji when he tried to block the creature. "Katsu!" Though small in size, the explosive construct still packed quite a punch with regards to power. However, with the explosion going off at point blank range between the two fighters, both Deidara and Neji were knocked back by the force of the explosion. Deidara suffered a few more tumbles with newly singed eyebrows and hair. Neji suffered a burnt arm due to him protecting his limb with chakra in the split second before the explosion occurred.

"Ghhrrr" Gritting his teeth, Deidara tried to move his arms anyway to tear away his shirt and activate his final jutsu. He did manage to tear away the shirt, revealing a sealed mouth on his chest but before he could unseal the mouth and release his ultimate technique, he found that he couldn't move.

"Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Imitation Technique), Success!" Shikamaru finally revealed himself, having attached his shadow to Deidara's, immobilising the man immediately.

/Shit! I can't move./ Deidara's mind was travelling at light speed trying to find a way to escape his binding in order to enact his final attack.

"Shikamaru, don't let up on the Kagemane!" Neji warned as he still had his Byakugan activated to watch and anticipate Deidara's actions. "He's trying to escape and enact an attack. That seal on his chest has some very disturbing chakra routes throughout his body. I don't recommend piercing it with your Kage ? and I'm not sure if killing him the normal way will not accidentally activate whatever jutsu he has prepared anyway."

"So if Kage Nui (Shadow Thread) and the Kage Kubi Shibari no Jutsu (Shadow Neck Bind Technique) doesn't work. I'll just use something else." Narrowing his eyes in hidden anger, Shikamaru commented his suspicions. "You're the one that went after the Kazekage, didn't you?" He asked suddenly.

"So what if I did." Deidara spat out his words in fury towards Shikamaru; he was still trying his best to move his arms in order to release his seal.

"In that case, this is for making my girlfriend cry." Shikamaru muttered under his breath with a suspicious amount of malice. He changed his hand seals whilst still holding the Kagemane no Jutsu (Shadow Imitation technique). Slowly, the shadows beneath Deidara grew larger and larger in size. The texture of the shadows also gradually changed to a more liquid nature. The flowing shadow moved with a lingering rippling effect; unhurriedly, the shadow leisurely climbed up Deidara's broken legs, up his chest and along his arms.

"Wha... What are you doing? What is this?!" Deidara panicked but he couldn't do anything. Eventually, even his head and whole body was

covered in the black mass, but still the shadows grew until it formed a perfect sphere of pitch darkness with Deidara somewhere inside.

"Mukage no Jutus (Shadow Void Technique) (19), Complete." Shikamaru stated as the round sphere gradually shrank in size. It grew smaller and smaller until it eventually disappeared, leaving no trace of Deidara behind, as if he never existing in the first place.

"What was that move, Shikamaru?" Neji whispered in awe, having never seen such a technique before. "That man just... disappeared. He dissolved in your shadows."

"That's exactly what this technique does. It 'nullifies' matter, changing 'something' into 'nothing'. No particle, no dust, no sound, not even his soul is left. This technique devours everything." Shikamaru concluded softly, before shaking his head and returning his attention to his injured team mate. "Let's get you and the others back to Konoha. I'm sure the Raikage will be pleased that we managed to rescue his brother."

"Deidara is dead. And we've lost the Hachibi too." Zetsu announced into the darkened cavern.

"Doesn't matter. War will come to the Shinobi Villages soon regardless. They are not yet ready for us, but we are already prepared." Tobi declared confidently, though he was frustrated that so many things kept on going wrong today. Behind him leaning against the wall nonchalantly was Kabuto, smirking quietly in his corner.

"Remember our deal. Once you are finished, you leave Konoha to me." Danzo spoke out, glaring at his two 'temporary allies'.

"Hump. Whatever is left of Konoha once Pein is finished you mean." Tobi shrugged. "Don't worry, I keep my promises." Tobi stepped forward before his rag tag group of men. "From now on, we are at

war." He declared firmly, having his sights on destroying all nations once and for all.

END

I was originally planning to end Deidara and Kisame earlier in the fight against Bee. But when I actually started typing, the story wrote itself into a different plot. Why does this story fight me so? It really has a mind of its own.

But at least things are moving along quickly now. Danzo's out of Konoha and working with Kabuto and Akatsuki. Next Chapter is Mind-controlled Pein in Konoha, and Kisame finding Itachi - what happens then?

I'm hoping that I will have this story finished in another 2 to 3 chapters, plus an epilogue. Fingers crossed. This time, I actually do want to finish this story.

REFERENCES

(1) Proof of exchange between Danzo and Orochimaru with regards to the experiments, and implantation of Sharingan eyes and the cells for Senju Harashima. This is confirmed in Naruto Cannon, volume 49, capture 454

(2) I hated the wimpy, weak looking Fire Daimyo in the Manga Cannon. I'd like to think that he's just hiding behind a facade.

(3) These are real Root Anbu members, from Naruto Cannon

(4) I never did understand why Hatake Sakumo was not reanimated through Edo Tensei. Makes it difficult to write his fight scenes though, because I don't know how he fights.

(5) Orochimaru is DEAD. He is NOT going to be REVIVED like in the Cannon series.

(6) One of the Gate Guardians

(7) Since I've got Fire Bending, why not include Water Bending as well. Sasuke has fire, Itachi now has water. Yes, it's ironic.

(8) The fight that was missing from Trials of Faith, Chapter 8

(9) Follow on from Trials of Faith Chapter 8. One of the Mist Ninjas that participated in the Kuunoki Chuunin Exams

(10) Design based off something between Renji Abarai's Zabimaru (From Bleach) and Ham's metallic whip blade (from 3x3 Eyes) Volume 32 Chapter 3. The effect is more like Bunchu's Kinben (from Houshin Engi) though. Feel free to google images for these weapons.

(11) Copied from "Rippling Ophelia" of Claymore

(12) I've been doing a bit more analysis of how Kisame fights (in order to write these fight scenes). These are just my thoughts. He seems to favor Water Ninjutsu and his shark summons more than proper sword techniques. Kisame only ever uses Samehada to block and suck Chakra or swings it around to shred his opponents. He doesn't show a lot of finesse or swordsmanship techniques. Even Sasuke uses his sword more in cannon than Kisame does.

(13) Haven't made up my mind yet whether Juro should die or not. Any opinions anyone?

(14) I'm not sure if Kisame is able to make such a giant floating sphere of water, but considering he was able to create a small one with his shark summon instead, I'm assuming he can do this with this technique too, just need more Chakra.

(15) Uzumaki Kushina

(16) Mentioned in Trials of Faith, Chapter 9. Nagato use to be Uzumaki Tenka

(17) I really liked that image. When I first read the fight between Konan and Tobi, it seemed a bit pathetic to me. She was the only female Akatsuki member and yet she showed no Taijutsu or Genjutsu skills, wields no weapons except for fragile paper wings. I wanted to show Konan as someone who can fight dirty, who is willing to go that extra mile; someone with a strong conviction of her own.

(18) I always wondered if it was Sharingan versus Rinnegan, who would win. In this case, I'm assuming that with 2 Mangakyo Sharingans, Pein's Rinnegan would lose. And now, he is under Tobi's control.

(19) The fifth technique in the Kage Michi (Ways of the Shadows) which is an originally list of techniques developed by Kaga, and now passed on to Shikamaru. You can learn more about these techniques on my website. This is also the first time I've let Shikamaru use this technique.

Final Comment: I have no idea when I can get the next chapter out. So sorry in advance if I don't update in a soon-ish manner.